

Strengthening health systems towards better health outcomes



Article by Chen Zhu

This annual conference of the Global Forum for Health Research is an important event for China and for health improvement across the world. I wish to extend, on behalf of the Ministry of Health of China, warm congratulations on the successful convocation of the Forum. I also wish to take this opportunity to share with you some of my ideas and experiences about the development of the health sector and the promotion of human health.

A brief overview

Improving health is one of mankind's eternal pursuits. To provide each citizen with equitable, accessible, reliable and high-quality health care is an important responsibility of every government and an important condition for promoting health for all. It is also an important indication of a country's economic and social development and level of modernization. Since the beginning of the 20th century, life expectancy has increased greatly and quality of life has improved. Thanks to innovations in medical science and technology, mankind has not only eliminated smallpox but also acquired the technical means to prevent and control many other diseases. The Human Genome Project that began in the late 20th century has enabled mankind to know more about life itself. All this has created favourable conditions for improvements in human health outcomes.

Having said that, mankind still faces serious challenges and harsh realities on the road towards better health outcomes. Health improvement is not yet at the top of the political agendas of countries across the world. Preoccupation with economic growth has resulted in health losses and increasing burdens of disease. Inequity in health has emerged as a major problem. There are big gaps across different regions, countries and groups of people in terms of health resources and health conditions. The environment, climate change, urbanization, industrialization and trade globalization pose new problems for health systems in all countries. Population ageing and rising service costs have exerted greater pressure on health financing systems. There is no room for complacency when it comes to the control of communicable diseases, and the burden of chronic, non communicable diseases is increasing. The achievements of medical science and

technology have failed to benefit each and every member of society in a fair and timely manner.

Like many developing countries, China has gained unique experiences in developing its health sector. China has also experienced twists and turns along this path. Under the planned economy, China carried out large-scale patriotic health campaigns organized by the government. As a result, people's living and working conditions improved markedly. By stressing prevention services and appropriate technologies in health, China made significant contributions to the development of the concept of primary health care and to international health. China created a health system suited to its own national situation and put in place a health service network covering both rural and urban areas. It set up a sustainable health financing system with the support of fiscal and collective economic forces. Each of these important measures helped substantially improve health of the Chinese people. In the three decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, the life expectancy of the Chinese people increased by over 20 years. In those 30 years, China enjoyed a faster rate of health improvement and richer labour resources than any other country in the world.

Since China adopted a policy of reform and opening-up to the outside world in the late 1970s, its overall national strength has increased and remarkable achievements have been made in economic and social development. From 1978 to 2006, China's Gross Domestic Product grew at an average rate of 9.7% annually, much higher than the world average of 3.3%. China's economic growth has been a kind of miracle. The fiscal revenues have increased dramatically, reaching nearly 4 trillion Renminbi (RMB) in 2006 (over 500 billion US dollars). The per capita disposable income of those in urban areas and the net income of rural residents have grown at an average annual rate of 7% since 1978. Along with rapid economic growth, China's health sector has also undergone rapid development. The health care network covering both rural and urban areas has further developed and channels for funding have further expanded. The quality of health services has improved, the number of health workers has increased, and the educational level of health workers has improved. China is now facing rare historical opportunities for further developing its health sector.

Recent achievements in China's health development

The Chinese government attaches great importance to the health of its people and to the development of the health sector. In China's 11th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development, health sector development is listed as a critical step in realizing scientific development and the improvement of people's life. Not long ago, the State Council approved Guidelines for Health Sector Development during the 11th Five-Year Plan period, and the General Office of the State Council issued the National Plan for Food and Drug Safety during the 11th Five-Year Plan period. Since 2003, a series of breakthroughs have been made in the development of China's health sector.

Stepping up efforts to improve the disease prevention system and other public health systems:

In 2003, China launched a three-year plan for improving the disease prevention and control system, as well as strengthening systems for communicable disease treatment. So far, the tasks set out in this plan have been accomplished, and over 5000 projects have been carried out with a total investment of 26.9 billion Renminbi. In addition, public health information systems and health supervision systems have been further strengthened. As a result, public health services in both rural and urban areas have been improved along with the capacity of service providers, raising the standards of health services. Tremendous efforts have been made to prevent and control major diseases. The DOTS strategy has been adopted to treat tuberculosis. Medical assistance is provided to those suffering from late stage schistosomiasis. Hepatitis B vaccine has been included in the national immunization plan. The policy of "Four Frees and One Care"¹ has been implemented for AIDS patients and their families. Starting from 2007, China has taken further steps to include vaccines against Hepatitis A, cerebrospinal meningitis, and other communicable diseases in the national immunization plan, increasing the number of vaccines covered under the government's free immunization plan from 7 to 15. With a view to ensuring equal access to essential public health services, China is now working to draw up a list of essential public health services in an effort to fulfil the government responsibilities and effectively achieve the goal of promoting public health.

Strengthening rural health services: Beginning in 2003, the Chinese Government started a new cooperative medical system. The government provides the bulk of funding for this system, with rural residents paying a small amount and rural households forming the main unit of participation. Smooth progress is being made to advance this project. This system has been set up in about 2400 counties and cities with 700 million rural residents participating. Starting in 2005, the Chinese Government has launched another rural health service system development plan. Within five years, nearly 21.7 billion RMB will be invested in the rural health service system. This plan will help upgrade rural health services, improving service quality and making rural health services

more accessible and equitable.

Developing community health care in urban areas: The Chinese Government is following a regional plan, adjusting the allocation of health resources to promote health for every household with the support of communities. Efforts are being made to develop a new type of urban health care system based on a community health service model that gives priority to prevention and combines preventive and curative services. Possibilities for a two-way referral system are being explored, along with effective coordination between community health institutions, hospitals, centres for disease control and prevention, and maternal and child health care institutions. By the end of 2006, 278 cities had instituted community based health services, accounting for over 98% of all cities in China. In addition, 23 036 community health service institutions had been set up across the country. Beginning in 2007, the central government has offered financial support through payment transfers to cities in central and western China to help them develop community health services.

Improving the health financing system: In recent years, government inputs to the financing of total health expenditures in China have risen, while residents' individual contributions have gone down. The contribution of the government health appropriation and the social health expenditure to the total expenditure on health has increased from 40% in 2001 to 48% in 2005. Residents' individual contributions have dropped from 60% in 2001 to 52% in 2005. Positive developments are underway in the structure of health financing sources. Approximately 170 million employees in urban areas now enjoy basic medical insurance coverage, with total insurance funds of 174.7 billion RMB in 2006. The State Council has launched pilot projects of basic medical insurance plans for urban residents in the second half of this year. The Chinese Government has also worked vigorously to develop a medical financial assistance system in both rural and urban areas. This system will rely mainly on governmental input to offer financial assistance to low-income families and poor families with large medical expenses. A total of 2.12 billion RMB was spent on medical financial assistance in China in 2006. Commercial health insurance is also growing rapidly, with total revenue reaching 37.7 billion RMB nationwide in 2006.

Tightening regulation of medical institutions and enhancing service quality:

A core principle of the Ministry of Health of China is to ensure that health services bring real benefit to the people. As such, the Ministry of Health urges all health service staff to comply voluntarily with public supervision efforts. Since 2005, the Ministry of Health has organized hospitals nationwide to participate in activities with the theme of "putting patients first and improving service quality". These efforts have helped to standardize health service delivery, to enhance service quality, and to improve relationships between medical staff and patients. Efforts have also been made to strengthen pharmaceutical supervision by regulating pharmaceutical production, distribution and prices,

raising public awareness of the rational use of medicines, and upholding the rights and interests of patients.

Strengthening the capacity for innovation in medical science and promoting traditional Chinese medicine: In 2006, the State Council issued its National Outline for Medium- and Long-term Scientific and Technological Development, listing population issues, health and pharmaceutical innovation as top priorities in science and technology. With a growing cohort of medical professionals, China's capacity for health research is also growing. Traditional Chinese medicine is an important part of China's health system. It has played an instrumental role in disease prevention and treatment, rural health development, and urban community health services. Traditional Chinese medicine has its unique advantages in handling difficult and complicated cases, and it is an important part of China's historical heritage. To foster innovation in traditional medicine, in 2007, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Health jointly issued the Outline for Innovation and Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine 2006–2020, charting the course for further development in the traditional medical sector.

Intensifying reform of health system: In 2006, the State Council set up a Health System Reform Coordination Group to promote the development of China's health system; to address issues of access to doctors and hospitals; and to improve the health of the people. The National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Health serve as the coordinators, and they are responsible for organizing more than 10 governmental bodies to address key issues in public health reform. Over the course of a year's work, important progress has been made. We will continue to integrate governmental guidance with market mechanisms, while addressing relationships between fairness and efficiency in health system reform. It is the duty of government at all levels to improve the health of the people, to realize, protect and develop the rights and interests of the people with regard to health. Taking China's realities as a starting point, China must learn from other countries while exploring its own way towards health system reform with Chinese characteristics. We should focus our efforts on institutional innovation, and, at the same time, take effective measures to solve those problems that the people care about most. Efforts will be made to upgrade the health service system in rural and urban areas; to improve medical insurance and its funding mechanisms; to expand medical financial assistance services; and to strengthen governmental supervision and regulation, enabling the health system to operate in a more efficient way.

The health of the Chinese people keeps improving. The average life expectancy in China reached 73 years in 2005, an increase of 4.4 years from 68.6 years in 1990. The mortality rate of children under the age of 5 years dropped from 61 per thousand in 1991 to 20.6 per thousand in 2006. Maternal mortality fell from 80/100 000 in 1990 to 41.1/100 000 in 2006. The overall health of the Chinese people is leading that of most developing countries. Marked

results have been achieved in controlling HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria. The number of people with malaria has been reduced from 24 million in the 1970s to 116 000 in 2006, with malaria endemic areas now much smaller in size. China is taking effective measures to honour its commitment to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. At the same time, this is part of China's contribution to global health development.

Deepening international cooperation and advancing health research

Since 1963, China has continuously sent medical teams to more than 60 countries and areas in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and Oceania, involving more than 2 million medical staff and treating more than 200 million patients. In recent years, the Chinese Government has increased aid to developing countries, African countries in particular. President Hu Jintao announced at the Beijing Summit Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in November 2006 that the Chinese Government will provide a grant of 300 million RMB within three years to help African countries prevent and cure malaria by providing artemisinin and setting up malaria prevention and control centres. We have provided 30 African countries seriously affected by malaria with artemisinin and sponsored seven training sessions on malaria prevention and control in 2006.

Diseases respect no country borders, as the saying goes. It is the common wish of mankind to effectively control diseases and to improve health. With globalization gaining momentum, it is all the more important to strengthen international cooperation in health. And international cooperation promises great progress in the prevention and control of communicable diseases, in health research, medical education and health systems and policy administration. The Global Forum for Health Research and the World Health Organization should play important roles in guiding and facilitating international cooperation. Effective cooperation between countries is critical to our collective efforts to fight disease, to improve health, to advance the progress of mankind and to uphold harmony and stability in the world.

Promoting health research: All countries are now facing great challenges in health financing and ever increasing health expenditures. Currently, limited funds are available for health research, and this problem is especially pronounced in developing countries. Insufficient investments in research and limited capacity for medical innovation are barriers to scientific decision-making and the development of the health sector, and therefore have a negative influence on the health of the people. All countries need to step up efforts to increase investment in health research, to organize strong systems for innovative research, and to bring value products from scientific research into production. At the same time, full use should be made of scientific evidence, and we should also work to bridge gaps between decision-making and scientific research.

Training more health professionals: Human resources are at the core of breakthroughs in health research, and are the driving force for the sustainable development of the health sector. Most developing countries face a shortage of health professionals, especially health professionals with innovation capacities. There is ample room for strengthened cooperation between developing and developed countries in the area of human resources development. At the same time, developing countries should also strive to create environments that foster innovative talent, to create an atmosphere of respect for medical science, for knowledge and for human resources. This can help reduce the loss of human resources and help attract those who have gone abroad to return to serve their own countries.

Strengthen exchanges and cooperation: Peace, development and cooperation are the core concerns of our time. We in the health research field should deepen cooperation at national, regional and international levels. The success of Human Genome Project is a case in point, as it is the product of close cooperation among scientists from different countries. China is ready to step up exchanges and cooperation with developing and developed countries to work towards the goals of improving human health, advancing health research and making our lives better. □

Chen Zhu is Minister of Health for China. He took his master's degree at Shanghai Second Medical University and a doctor's degree at Paris VII University, France. He was professor at the Ruijin Hospital affiliated to Shanghai Second Medical University (now Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine) and became a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Director of Chinese Human Genome Centre at Shanghai and Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Professor Chen also holds the titles of foreign associate of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA, member of the Third World Academy of Sciences, titular member of European Academy of Arts, Sciences and Humanities, foreign associate of French Academy of Sciences, foreign member of Academia Europaea, external scientific member of the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Genetics and Co-Chair of InterAcademy Panel. He has dedicated himself to research on leukemia and is well-known for the advancement of molecular target-based therapy in human cancer. He has published more than 200 papers in over a 100 journals. Professor Chen was the first non-French winner of Prix de l'Qise by La Ligue Nationale contre le Cancer of France and was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur.

References

¹ "Four frees" refers to providing free antiretroviral drugs to AIDS patients with financial difficulties and without any medical insurance; free counselling and screening testing for people voluntarily seeking HIV/AIDS counselling and testing throughout China; free drugs for pregnant women infected with HIV to block mother-to-child transmission and free testing reagents for their babies; and free tuition for AIDS orphans during the nine-year compulsory education period. "One care" refers to including

AIDS patients with financial hardship in government support programmes, providing them with necessary relief in accordance with relevant regulations, helping those AIDS patients who are capable of working to find jobs to increase their income, and increasing public awareness of HIV/AIDS to reduce stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS.