Summary

International Conference on Cognitive Decline and its Economic Consequences.

Keio University, Tokyo, October 5 and 6, 2015.

 Shortly after the World Health Organization launched its first World Report on Ageing and Health, the Keio University hosted the International Conference on Cognitive Decline and its Economic Consequences as the first of three meetings convened by the World Economic Forum to address the nexus between ageing, cognition, financial services and technology. The full program brochure can be seen on the following link; http://www.global.keio.ac.jp/en/docs/Keio_WEF_brochure.pdf.

Japan leads the world in terms of rapid demographic change and as a response – public and private sector innovation with regards to population longevity. The Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan, Mr. Yasuhisa Shiozaki, opened the meeting by stressing how critical smart policies and actions related to ageing are to the future of Japan’s long term growth. He listed several government initiatives in existence or in development to help address the financial, social, health and economic aspects of ageing in general as well as more specifically the impacts of dementia. This latter point is salient in that about 5 million people in Japan have Alzheimer’s disease and another 4 million have mild cognitive impairment.

Then, Prof. Hideyuki Okano, Dean of Keio University School Medicine, a leading scientist in regenerative medicine and neuroscience gave a keynote lecture and offered broad perspectives of the magnitude of ageing and cognitive decline as well as progress of medical science. He concluded that in countries with higher elderly populations, higher incidence of dementia poses a clear risk to society; and developing preemptive medicine for Alzheimer’s disease and other causes of dementia is an important means of mitigating the problem.

In a session exploring cognitive decline and its economic consequences from a public perspective, Dr. Koji Miura, Director-General of Japan’s Health and Welfare Bureau for the Elderly, stated that by 2025 about one in five people over 65 will have dementia. In addition, Assistant Professor Mitsuhiro Sado indicated that the total societal costs of dementia in Japan are about $120B – of which healthcare costs account for 13%, long term care 44%, and informal care 43%. The large burden carried by families being usually ignored. Future projections suggest that costs will increase rapidly over time. This data and these trends led the Prime Minister of Japan in November 2014 to call for a “new action plan for dementia”. This plan aims to develop age and dementia-friendly communities. Today, many design features in Japanese cities are already in place and are way ahead of many countries at equivalent levels of development.

Assistant Professor Yasumichi Ari heads the truly unique Center for Supercentenarian Medical Research (people over 110 years old) at Keio University. The fact that such a center is now possible is proof of the speed of demographic change underway in Japan. In time the determinants of longevity and full functioning well beyond 100 years will be detected. Current research suggests that higher educational attainment, lower tobacco use, “openness” as a health behavior, physical activity and community interaction all predict longevity. And each indicate where known preventive measures applied today could have benefits in future.
Several presentations addressed the underlying molecular biology and scientific insights into cognitive and brain related aging disorders. Dr. Reisa Sperling from Harvard Medical School raised the need to have bold assays to predict amyloid β and tau accumulation in the brain if we are to use predictive medicine to address Alzheimer’s disease. That will lead to easier mass based screening early in the disease, opening opportunities for early treatment in ways now commonly accepted in relation to many cancers and for heart disease. However, this is still decades away. In the interim, a range of educational and non-pharmaceutical interventions were mentioned that hold promise to maintain cognitive function and in time, provide augmented support to people with dementia. These included educational initiatives supported by the Kumon Institute of Education and the Nippon Foundation as well as the emergence of robotics supported by artificial intelligence.

Ms. Ritsuko Inokuma, from Yomiuri Shimbun, a major newspaper, focuses on reporting about dementia. She highlighted the way dementia is heavily stigmatized and stressed the importance of working with people with dementia when developing policies. She asked: who takes responsibility for people with dementia, and can decide for someone with dementia? Leaders from the worlds of finance and banking later addressed many of these questions.

For example, Ms. Akiko Nomura of the Nomura Institute of Capital Markets Research highlighted implications of cognitive decline for financial services. The concentration of assets with age is a reality in most OECD countries. Several types of fraud are related to age-related cognitive decline: bank transfer fraud, grandparent scams and financial instrument related fraud, which all together cost billions of dollars. The speakers indicated that financial fraud in older people was common in the US, Japan and Brazil.

Some responses are underway by industry: two include better guidelines for senior investor protection after age 75 along with extensive care beyond 80 and adult guardianship systems. Ms. Nomura stressed the importance of making a designation of your guardian before cognitive decline starts, though this not easy to do.

In the US, financial advisors are “on the front line” and could play role in reducing fraud and detecting dementia. The discipline of ‘financial gerontology” was established in 1988 as a multidisciplinary field at the nexus of gerontology and finance. It integrates the notions of the health span and the wealth span. It also requires a new approach to longevity risk.

Mr. Masaaki Nagamura, from Tokio Marine Holdings, discussed efforts to align emerging dementia demands and insurance. Long Term Care insurance in Japan is run by the public sector with members tripling to almost 6m for 2015. Increased co-pays for wealthier insured people are being implemented.

He highlighted the role of insurance agents (250 000 versus 50 000 retail outlets). Insurance agents represent an untapped resource in society to detect dementia. They know their clients and communities. Tokio Marine (TM) has a product “reward yourself for staying healthy” that incents healthy status at a predesignated age. TM provides in-home care services and raises awareness of health. They are increasing their focus on dementia support at work and in the community. In time for the meeting they announced that more than 3000 TM group company employees have become “Dementia Supporters” as of September 2015.
In the same session Ms. Rebecca Tong of Swiss Reinsurance reviewed several products currently addressing the needs of older people in Asia. Not many explicitly target LTC aspects of dementia and related costs due to multiple problems: weak public perception of need, expense, the inability of sales agents to articulate the complex reasons to buy, weak incentives, and product design that is difficult to understand even within the industry. She highlighted the constraints on developing new products in Japan, pointing to very expensive cancer research products doing well (without bringing health gains to clients!) and others not selling. She also gave examples of innovations across the industry, citing The Vitality Group as a pioneer and representing the most innovative approach to address longevity and health through its insurance products.

Finally, Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation’s Mr. Seijo Yamagishi highlighted a wide range of ways in which they address people with cognitive decline both within their banking client base as well as in collaboration with a number of local governments. They are active in enhancing the adult guardianship system as it applies to people with “difficulty with their ability to judge.” He mentioned the need for new asset management services for customers with cognitive decline and that we must do so with complex privacy provision rules in mind.

The Keio-World Economic Forum’s first International Conference on Cognitive Decline and its Economic Consequences closed with the understanding that there is still much to be done. The Keio University meeting highlighted what is quickly becoming a pressing world issue, and focused on some current developments. However, we will not be able to capitalize on the opportunities provided by a greying economy nor will we be able to aid those impacted by cognitive decline without greater innovations and partnerships.

These will be further elaborated in the following two meetings to be convened by the World Economic Forum and respective local hosts in London, February 2016 and in Philadelphia, May 2016.