**SCMP Article**

**Hong Kong must get smart on elderly needs**

Last weekend, Hong Kong held its first Gerontech and Innovation Expo at the Convention and Exhibition Centre. It was co-hosted by the government and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, of which I am chairperson. Given the show’s success in attracting some 40,000 attendees, I expect we will see more events like it in the future.

The aim was to introduce Hong Kong to the concept of “gerontechnology” – the use of technology to meet the needs of the elderly. With an ageing population, Hong Kong needs to pay attention to this field. It will offer the community new ways to improve life for the elderly and those who care for them. The field will also create opportunities for innovators, designers and the business sector.

Thanks to modern medicine and lifestyles, we think it is normal for people to be healthy, fit and active in their 60s, 70s and even 80s. But when the effects of ageing do come along, they can be quite sudden. Many of us are experiencing this, and my own family is no exception. Last year, my father – who is in his 80s – started to see his mobility decline. To cut a long story short, I found myself looking for devices that would help him, such as wheelchairs.

It was the first time I had seriously thought about these sorts of products. To my surprise, I found there are quite limited options available on the market in Hong Kong. It is only when you or a loved one need these devices that you find this out. The products were not ideal, and we simply had to make do with the best we could find.

A few months later, I happened to be leading a delegation to the International Home Care and Rehabilitation Exhibition in Japan. My original plan was to spend only an hour or so at the exhibition. Instead, I ended up spending the entire day looking at the amazing range of hi- and low-tech products, including a huge selection aimed at improving mobility.

They had a robot that can transfer a patient out of a bed. They had a bed that turns into a wheelchair. They had a walker on wheels that helps pull the user uphill, and yet slows them when they go downhill. They also displayed many basic and simple things – like forks with bends in the prongs, so noodles don’t slip off. I was very impressed.

The Japanese government knows it cannot address the needs of its ageing population on its own. It is pushing the private sector to come up with ideas, and companies in the vehicle, insurance and other sectors are developing and supplying new devices and new approaches to things like care homes.

They are looking for ways to help the elderly look after themselves in their own homes, and to provide labour-saving solutions in care home environments. One example is a robot instructor to lead groups of senior citizens in exercise classes.

Japan is further down the road than Hong Kong in terms of its ageing population. But we are not that far behind – one third of our population will be over 65 in just 20 years or so.

Last weekend’s expo featured exhibits from Japan and many other places, including many local companies. Some media reports on the expo mentioned that gerontech products can be quite expensive. This is probably true, especially with some cutting-edge or niche luxury devices.

But the big commercial opportunities will be in meeting the needs of the broader ageing population – individuals, families and public- and private-sector care facilities.

The demand will be for solutions that are cost-effective, for example by reducing labour costs. An extra challenge in the Hong Kong environment may be to create devices that are economical with space.

For innovators who can combine new technology with creativity and affordability, this could be a major opening. The potential is enormous when you consider that the mainland will also find itself with an ageing population in the coming decades.

Ultimately, the opportunities lie in meeting a growing and large social need. Gerontech promises all of us hope for an independent, productive and comfortable old age.