The road to recovery
Bolstering brain health makes perfect sense

As technology means fewer people are needed to carry out physical work and more are required for intellectual tasks, the role of the brain in the global economy is becoming increasingly important

By Vladimir Hachinski, president, World Federation of Neurology; chair, Working Group, World Brain Alliance

We are our brains. Hippocrates recognised this 2,500 years ago in observing that “from the brain, and from the brain only, arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and jests, as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs and tears. Through it… we think, see, hear and distinguish the ugly from the beautiful, the bad from the good”.

The key to health and well-being

Without a healthy brain, little else matters. It is crucial to the achievement of health, to solving global problems and to creating a better world. The leading non-communicable diseases (NCDs) of heart disease and stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes depend for their prevention, treatment and rehabilitation on competent brains, unclouded by stress, drugs or an unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and addictions to tobacco and alcohol, as acknowledged by the recent declaration by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2011.

However, there is one factor that all these risk factors have in common in that they affect the reward system in the brain. Moreover, individuals in the anguish of anxiety or the despair of depression cannot necessarily follow healthy lifestyles. Consequently it is imperative that the G8, the World Health Organization, the UN and national governments avail themselves of the expertise of those who study the brain and its disorders.

Brain health begins with the mother

It is well established that a healthy pregnancy and child health initiatives. The G8 can have a major role in promoting health, well-being and wealth by making brain health part of all policies, investing in neuroscience and taking advantage of the role of the brain in the global economy is becoming increasingly important. Depression. When the brain fails, the costs are staggering. Dementia consumes about one per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), and will rise with the world’s ageing population. Disability is more costly than death. Stroke is a leading cause of disability, brain failure and epilepsy.

A few common risk factors account for a large proportion of disease, namely development as well as in the acquisition of lifelong habits. Women play a leading role in this. Their importance is recognised in Non-Communicable Diseases: a Priority for Women’s Health and Development, published by the NCD Alliance in 2011. NCD control must be closely linked to the Millennium Development Goals, especially the maternal and child health initiatives.

In the digital age, repetitive physical labour and most activities that do not require intellectual input can be automated and robotised. Consequently, it becomes more important to have a higher level of intelligence and social skills in order to function and to be productive in what is an increasingly knowledge-based society.

The internet and social media have provided multiple opportunities for improving the human condition. They also require a higher degree of intellectual capacity than has been previously required, even until relatively recent times.

The World Brain Alliance

In recognition of the above facts, all the major brain organisations of the world came together to found the World Brain Alliance in Geneva on 30 March 2011. This umbrella group has the aim of promoting brain health and of treating, rehabilitating and preventing brain and mental disorders. It also seeks to move neurological and psychiatric issues up the agenda of global health policymakers.

The alliance is made up of 10 different organisations: Alzheimer’s Disease International, the European Brain Council, the International Brain Research Organization, the International Child Neurology Association, the International League Against Epilepsy, the World Federation of NeuroRehabilitation, the World Federation of Neurology, the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies, the World Psychiatric Association and the World Stroke Organization. Together, these organisations represent most countries of the world.

Their memberships encompass not only health professionals, but also neuroscientists, patient groups and volunteers, all willing to help implement the policies that will lead to better brains and better health and well-being.

The G8 can have a major role in promoting health, well-being and wealth by making brain health part of all policies, investing in neuroscience and taking advantage of the knowledge currently available and applicable through the World Brain Alliance.
The human brain is not only at the centre of our sense of well-being, but is also critical to economic growth as physical labour becomes less important.