A: Much of that will depend on the way WHO Member States react to the CIPIH report during the World Health Assembly. Countries clearly must use all the available legal instruments at their disposal to ensure their populations have access to enough quality medicines. We must provide the technical assistance so that countries know what the options are. Then it’s up to countries to choose from those options.

Q: What is WHO doing to improve access to patented and generic drugs for developing countries?

A: We have a number of programmes that assist countries or other organizations to ensure that they are selecting and buying cost-effective, safe medicines for major public health threats, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. We’re also looking at creating a database on the status of patents for antiretrovirals in different countries. Many researchers would find it useful to be aware of which medicines are under patent and which ones are not. This information is out there, but you must scavenge for it through web sites. My vision is to create some transparency. We need to come up with a web-based system to help countries streamline this process of patent identification. We can start with HIV/AIDS pharmaceuticals given the severity of this problem. The web site could function as follows: you have a map, you put the cursor on a country, click, and the country window opens, then you click on pharmaceuticals information, and then you have details about patents in that country.

Q: How can traditional knowledge and traditional medicines based on this knowledge be recognized?

A: The main issues with traditional medicines are safety and efficacy. The best way to solve the problem is to utilize the framework we use for other kinds of pharmaceuticals, while respecting traditional and local knowledge that have accumulated over centuries. People are either blindly enthusiastic about traditional and alternative medicines or hesitant to embrace them because they have misgivings about their effectiveness. Many developing countries use traditional medicines for primary health care, therefore quality and safety must be assured. We have also to find a way to monitor the composition of herbal preparations, which are subject to climate variations.

Q: The patent system was originally established to encourage researchers to share their findings for the public good. Today, research results can be accessed worldwide using the internet and open-access journals. Why do we need the patent system?

A: Discussion about what kind of information should be published has evolved partly because of the internet. 15 years ago this was not even a discussion. The patent system is there to give people the incentive to create new ideas, there has to be some way someone is inspired. People need some personal reward. Not that I think patents are the only system, there is benefit in making information available on the internet.

For more information please see: www.who.int/medicines_technologies.