

# Living Well in Japan's Aging Society

By Hinohara Shigeaki

## The Challenges Facing Japan's Rapidly Aging Society

Nowhere in the world is a population aging more rapidly than that of Japan. A nation is said to be an aging society when its senior population aged 65 or older exceeds 7% of the total population and an aged society when that figure reaches 14%. The senior population in Japan grew from 7% (1970) to more than 14% in only 24 years.

Figure 1 shows the speed of population aging in six countries, including Japan. It took 115 years for the percentage of seniors in France to grow from 7% to 14%. In the United States, the senior population is expected to reach 14% in 2013, 71 years after it crossed the 7% threshold.

The speed of the aging of Japan's population is especially striking when compared to these Western cultures. Current predictions suggest that the population of seniors aged 65 or older is going to hit 27.8% of the total population in 2025.

This is attributed to the fact that Japan has the world's lowest birthrate, at 1.29 (2003), while the number of people living to be 65 or older and 75 or older is increasing at a remarkable pace.

Japan's declining total special birthrate (the birthrate) and aging trends are expected to continue – and to contribute to growing healthcare costs.

As of April 2004, 24.66 million seniors representing nearly one-fifth of the population were aged 65 or older in Japan and as many as 10.88 million of these were aged 75 or older.

Also, while there were only 153 people over the age of 100 in 1963, there were 23,038 centenarians in Japan in 2004. The average life expectancy at birth among the Japanese is 78.36 for males and 85.33 for females (2003 figures), for an overall average of 81.84. This is the highest life expectancy for females in the world.

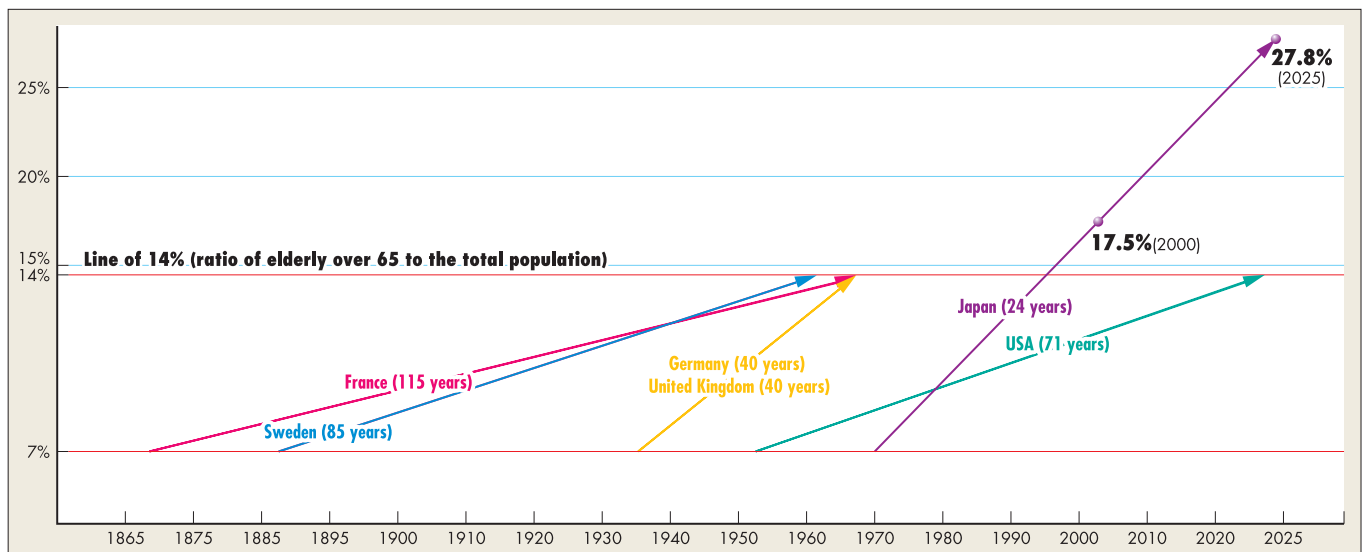
These trends mean that Japan is the most rapidly aging population in the world. Japan's productive population is going to decline as a result of the contin-

ued increase in the number of seniors and the continued decline in the birthrate. This will not only lead to a decrease in national productivity, but also induce higher healthcare costs, which in turn threatens to throw the Japanese economy into a serious crisis.

## Advocating the "New Elder Citizen"

The average life expectancy among the Japanese was 68 until about 36 years ago when seniors were defined as those aged 65 or older. Given that life expectancy is now approaching 82, however, it is going to be increasingly difficult to define people aged 65 or older as seniors and to provide them with services such as social and medical welfare benefits for the elderly. This is especially true given the expectations about Japan's economic capabilities in the future. I have therefore reached the conclusion that the definition of "senior citizen" should be adjusted by 10 years, from someone aged 65 or older to some-

Figure 1 International comparison of the number of elderly to the total population



Source: UN, *The Sex and Age Distribution of World Population, 1998*

one aged 75 or older.

Using the title “New Elder Citizen,” I launched a senior citizens’ group in September 2000 to help inspire seniors aged 75 or older to remain healthy and active. This is a group for elderly people who may have a chronic age-related illness, but who are mentally independent and have a healthy spirit.

The group is called “The Society of the New Elder Citizens,” and as of November 2004, four years after its inception, it has a membership of 3,400 seniors through Japan (except a few foreigners).

### ■ Lifestyles of the New Elder Citizen

Members of the Society are people who, in spite of their chronic age-related illnesses or other specific healthcare needs, have an independent and healthy mindset and approach each day with a positive, forward-looking attitude. This movement already has 10 local chapters nationwide.

I have developed three slogans to be used as guidelines by these elder citizens:

1. **To love.**
2. **To initiate.**
3. **To endure.**

I recommend that people strive to live according to the words of the poet William Wordsworth, who advocated “plain living and high thinking.”

### ■ Tips for Successful Aging

I recommend that all who would aspire to being a New Elder Citizen adopt the following five practices:

1. **To acquire a favorable life style.**
2. **To keep an active relationship with the society, maintaining close ties of friendship regardless of race or generation.**
3. **To possess hope and faith, with strength and power to endure any difficulties and disasters which we may encounter, with an indomitable**

**spirit. This spirit will arouse deep sympathy for others, and extend comfort to people who have lost hope in life.**

4. **To remember to keep a feeling of loving care for others and gratitude for our daily life.**
5. **To be aware that it is never too late to create something even in the days of old age.**

Hope is something that is engraved in your heart. Even when your internal mountain of hope is obscured by clouds so that you cannot see its peak, believe that it is still there – hidden only temporarily from view – and remain steadfast until relief arrives.

These notions are derived from a sense of spirituality, but there are also some specific physical steps for aging successfully.

Keep your total intake to 1,300 to 1,500 kcal per day, limit your consumption of animal fats, sugar and salt, and eat plenty of brightly colored vegetables. Consume plenty of vegetable oil and strive to maintain roughly the same body weight you had when you were 30. Because old age makes it easier for bones to break in a fall, be especially careful when walking. However, maintain good posture, take long strides, and use the muscles in your legs, arms, back and neck. Be careful when going up or down stairs.

Finally, always maintain an attitude of gratitude, be willing to volunteer and stay active in social activities, pursue rewarding hobbies, and plan opportunities to share the results with others.

Approach every day with an attitude that will allow you, at the end of your life, to be grateful for the life you were given.

This is my approach to living well. **JS**

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Illustration: Inagaki Taketaka

