

Aiming for Life with Dignity for All Seniors

By Hotta Tsutomu

BETWEEN 1972 and 1975, I worked as a Legal Attaché at the Japanese Embassy in the United States. At that time, my two sons played on a soccer team with a volunteer coach. Japan was still in its period of rapid economic growth, and people in Japan were focused on obtaining financial income. There was no interest in volunteerism, and interpersonal relations within communities were somewhat cold. After witnessing voluntary activities in the United States, I returned to Japan with the idea that for people to live happier lives we needed a society with more volunteerism where neighbors could easily help each other.

Launching volunteer work for seniors

In 1991, I retired from my position as Director-General of the Minister's Secretariat in the Ministry of Justice, and launched a movement to promote volunteer work based on mutual assistance. I decided to make seniors the primary focus of the movement. This was because Japan had the most rapidly aging population in the world at that time, and there were inadequate social mechanisms

to support seniors lacking physical mobility. The majority of these seniors were being looked after by their families, or more precisely by their daughters-in-law, partners or daughters, according to Japanese tradition. However, due to the increased life expectancy, the nursing care period for seniors also grew longer, and many families had become unable to shoulder the burden of this kind of care.

The response to our call for volunteers to help older people in their neighborhood in need of care surpassed my expectations, and today a network of thousands of NGOs based on voluntary services has been established across the country, and several hundreds of thousands of people visit seniors in need and provide care services and housekeeping assistance.

Start of the long-term care insurance system

In the 1990s, along with the movement to promote volunteer services for seniors, we realized that family members and volunteers alone could not provide adequate support for all seniors. Therefore, we appealed to the government and the Diet to create a system for

the provision of specialist care, and basic living assistance services such as cooking and housekeeping for all seniors who could no longer look after themselves. This became the public long-term care insurance system.

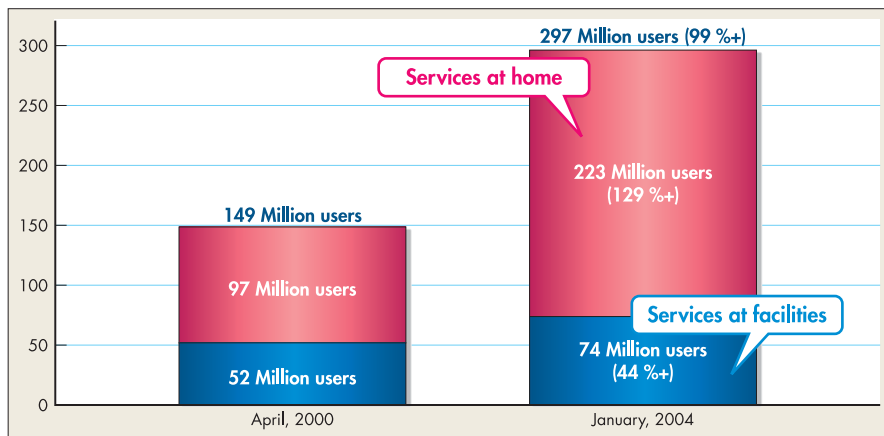
10% of the costs incurred by this system are charged to the people receiving the care, half of the remaining costs are paid by taxes, and the other half is funded by insurance premiums paid by citizens aged over 40. Men who felt that they were entitled to receive long-term care from their families were initially not very keen on this system. However, with the support of women, who knew the hardship of family-based care, the Long-term Care Insurance Law was passed in 1997, and took effect in 2000. Today, about three million seniors (2.5% of the entire population) are receiving care services under the system, and there is almost no public opposition to the system itself.

Care through long-term care insurance and volunteer support

Once care was secured through long-term care insurance, volunteers who wanted to help the elderly were able to devote themselves to meeting the emotional needs of seniors. Their main objective was offering housekeeping assistance, which includes looking after home gardens, taking walks, going to concerts and assisting with visits to spouses' graves, as well as taking seniors out for meals with their friends.

If these kinds of volunteer activities could be carried out nationwide, all Japanese seniors would be able to receive physical care through the long-term care insurance system whenever they needed it, whether or not they had family or assets, and their emotional needs could also be met through the help of volunteers. In other words, no matter what the circumstances might be, our seniors would be able to live their final years in

Figure 1 Changes in users of Care Insurance System



Source: The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

Illustration: NOBU

dignity. Today many Japanese are working hard in various fields in order to help achieve this noble goal.

Social participation by male seniors

Volunteer work not only brightens the lives of those receiving support, but also the lives of those providing it. In Japan's welfare field, the sense of fulfillment obtained by being of help to others through volunteer work was initially the sole territory of women. However, over the decades, older men have slowly begun to participate in volunteer welfare work. Initially men began participating in the management of volunteer organizations, and eventually found themselves putting on aprons and doing the cooking. Work such as home repairs, gardening and driving people places now tends to be done by men. Older men who do this kind of volunteer work are often the ones with the youthful complexion and bright eyes. They usually look 10 years younger than their actual age, and work smoothly and energetically and they are very popular with the older ladies.

Dealing with the white-collar "old boys"

The problem group among Japanese seniors is the retirees from large corporations and the civil service. Working in offices and serving in management positions, most white-collar retirees led workaholic lives up until the age of 60 in order to be successful. Since they spent most of their lives in the office, they did not forge any relationships in their local communities, and did not even have time to enjoy life with their families. After they retire, they have no volition to start being active in their neighborhood or do volunteer work. Their wives dislike having them in the house all the time. These men, with nothing to do, experience a deterioration in their physical abilities, and soon reach the point where they need long-term care. Helping to provide these



men with a reason to live a happy life after retirement is one of the major issues that we face in Japan today.

A life worth living for Japanese seniors

According to a traditional Japanese expression, the lives of retired people were considered "surplus lives." They had no role and were expected to lead a quiet life without imposing on others.

Women have more ability than men to create their own enjoyment to suit the time and situation, by interacting with those in their community. After surviving their husbands, Japanese women usually enjoy various activities with their close friends, as they live seven years longer than men, on average. Men who worked in small and medium-sized companies within the community also enjoy life after retirement with their friends and are even more active than their wives.

Recently however, some white-collar retirees have begun to rely less on their wives, and are giving volunteer work a try. In 10 years time, I believe a previously unimaginable number of white-collar retirees will be using their individual skills and participating in community activities.

A society where people can choose to work

Over half of Japanese seniors want to work even though they are over the age of 60. This is an unusually high number compared to North America and Europe. It shows that there are still many people who do not know any other way of life besides working.

In Japan, companies are allowed to restrict employment based on age. The government only goes so far as to recommend that companies extend their mandatory retirement age to 65.

Nevertheless, providing places to work for those who want to work would certainly contribute to their happiness. It would make their families happy, and might help reduce the time that they require long-term care. We need to create a society where people can work as they wish according to their circumstances and abilities. When this is realized, we will have the basis for a society where seniors and everyone else can enjoy their lives to the full. I believe that in the next 10 years we will come close to achieving just such a society. **JS**

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