

The Pharma Letter

Keywords: Japan, Medical influence, History, P Reed Maurer

A short history of Japanese medicine; an alternative view - by P Reed Maurer

Article | 27 June 2013

The first recorded outside medical influence on Japan was traditional Chinese medicine introduced via Korea in the 5th century. Diagnosis (Chung-i) was based primarily upon meticulous palpation of the pulse at each wrist. The therapeutic approach was via medicines, acupuncture, and moxibustion. Ginseng and powdered horn were the chief therapeutic agents. Among Japanese these influences continue to persist today, 1600 years later, says P Reed Maurer, long-time Japanese pharma industry watcher and president of International Alliances Limited (IAL), in an exclusive article for The Pharma Letter.

The first Westerners to arrive in Japan were not doctors. They were Portuguese sailors blown ashore at Tanegashima in 1542. Interesting quirk of history that this site is now where Japan launches its satellites into space. And the lasting influence of people from Portugal is tempura, now considered fine Japanese cuisine.

Americans did not come to Japan until 1853, 300 years after the Europeans. By the 16th century, indigenous schools of medicine were well established in Japan. They emphasized the priestly role of physicians and medical practices which were closely guarded secrets. In one school there were 17 rules to be strictly observed. A few of them are as follows:

- The teaching of medicine should be restricted to selected persons.
- You should not tell others what you are taught, regarding treatments, without permission.
- You should not give abortives to people.
- You should not speak ill of other physicians.
- You should not establish association with doctors who do not belong to this school.

You may note some modern day similarities to these rules

St Francis Xavier arrived in Japan in 1549. He and his fellow Jesuits were astute observers of Japanese cultural and medical practices. They frequently wrote detailed reports to their home office in Goa.

One report filed in 1585 contained the following information:

- Amongst us scrofula, pain from stone, gout and bubonic plague are frequent things; all of these diseases are rare in Japan.
- Amongst us the physicians prescribe through pharmacies, the Japanese physicians send the medicines from their homes.
- Amongst us pearls are used for personal ornamentation; in Japan they serve for nothing more than to be ground to make medicines.
- Amongst us if a physician is not examined, there is a penalty and he cannot practice; in Japan, in order to make a living, whoever wants to can be a physician.

Once again there are similarities to present practices of medicine in Japan

In 1691, after Westerners had been in Japan for 150 years a high Japanese official commented: "With the exception of medicines, we can dispense with everything that is brought to us from abroad. Thus, for a very long time those in the business of discovering and selling medicines have been in a favorable position.

Fast forward to 1867 when the Shogun left his castle in Tokyo and the emperor Meiji was restored to the throne. Japan opened itself to the world. An Imperial Proclamation at that time stated: "Wisdom and knowledge shall be sought after in all parts of the world to establish firmly the foundations of the Empire."

Missions were sent to the USA, Britain, France and Germany to assess government structures, military organizations, the court systems, etc. For medicine, however, there was no need to dispatch a mission as the German system was the overwhelming choice. In the ensuing decades all aspects of German medicine flowed into Japan. One observer stated: "There has never been an instance in history where a country not under colonial domination so completely adopted an outside system."

These events prompted Count Okuma, the premier of Japan in 1915 to say: "The Occidental part of Japanese civilization had begun with the introduction of Western medicine."

How did this evolve? One reason can be found by watching TV samurai dramas of today. The most revered samurai are either inflicting wounds or healing them. A second factor is the singular veneration Japanese people hold for medicine and their doctors. This tradition lives on.

Japanese firms first concentrated on in-licensing drugs

In the 20th century Japan passed through two distinct phases since the end of World War II, each lasting about 20 years. In the first phase Japan was a closed market in terms of pharma company investment. There was no discovery research so Japanese firms concentrated on licensing drugs from abroad.

In 1961 the basic health insurance scheme was established, thus promoting equality of health care throughout Japan. Subsequently, an open market stimulated booming growth. Discovery research blossomed and Japan became a source of new drugs which are today considered blockbusters.

Foreign companies made increased commitments to Japan which positioned them as leaders in the market. Meanwhile Japanese companies expanded outside Japan.

So much has changed but many traditions persisted for centuries. History has at least one lesson worth remembering: Some people, and some institutions do succeed and have enormous lasting effluence.

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