

BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDICINE IN JAPAN

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It is likely some readers of this article are of the opinion that Japan is a tough market to crack, says P Reed Maurer, long-time Japan pharma watcher and president of International Alliances Limited in an exclusive article for The Pharma Letter.

They see or imagine barriers designed to keep foreigners out, or at least bias the rules in favor of insiders. Throughout this brief history of medicine you may see confirmation of your assumptions, or not. Best to keep an open mind.

The first Westerners to arrive in Japan were some Portuguese sailors blown ashore at Tanegashima in 1542. Interesting to note this is the same site used today to launch Japanese rockets and hardware into space. Saint Francis Xavier, an intrepid missionary, arrived in 1549. Americans did not arrive until 1853, 300 years after the Europeans.

Attitude toward medicine

The Japanese were not impressed with what the Europeans brought to Japan, and kept them confined to limited real estate, thus restricting access to the people and country. In 1691, after Europeans were in Japan for 150 years, a high Japanese official commented: “With the exception of medicine, we can dispense with everything brought to us from abroad.” Note the exception, medicine, which puts people in the business of delivering health care in a historically favorable position.

The Premier of Japan in 1915, Count Okuma, said: “The Occidental part of Japanese civilization had begun with the introduction of Western medicine.” How did this attitude evolve and why is it so persistent today? Two reasons may be cited, ie:

1. Watch any of the samurai movies on TV and you will note the revered samurai are either inflicting wounds or healing them.
2. The singular veneration Japanese people hold for medicine. Patient visits to doctors average one per month. There are 7.9 acute care hospital beds in Japan per 1000 persons, versus 2.6 in the USA, and 2.3 in the UK.

Outside influence on medicine in Japan

The very first outside medical influence was Chinese traditional medicine introduced via Korea in the 5th century. Diagnosis (Chung-i) was primarily based on meticulous palpation of the pulse at each wrist. The therapeutic approach was via medicines, acupuncture, and moxibustion. Watch a sumo tournament today and you will notice telltale signs of the latter treatment. Ginseng and powdered horn were the chief therapeutic agents. Even today you can see rows of ginseng products in any pharmacy.

In the 16th century, 1100 years later, indigenous schools of medicine emphasized the priestly role of physicians and medical practices were closely guarded secrets. This high regard and respect for physicians continues in the 21st century, today.

Medical practice as it developed in Japan

A medical school in the 16th century had a list of 17 strict rules. Five of these follow:

- 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.

If you are familiar with medical schools in Japan you may note present day similarities.

Many of the early Europeans in Japan were Jesuits who wrote detailed reports to their headquarters on their observations of medical practices in Japan. The following are from a report filed in 1585:

- Amongst us, scofula, pain from stone, gout and bubonic plague are frequent things; all of these diseases are not in Japan.
- Amongst us the physicians prescribe through pharmacies; the Japanese physicians send medicines from their houses.
- 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.

Skipping ahead 300 years to 1857

In 1857 the Shogun left his castle in Tokyo and the Emperor Meiji was brought from Kyoto ending the Shogunate rule after 300 years. Japan declared itself open to the world. An Imperial Proclamation stated:

“Wisdom and knowledge should be sought after in all parts of the world to establish firmly the foundations of the Empire.”

Missions were sent out from Japan to the USA, Britain, France, and Germany to assess government structures, military organizations, courts, and all manner of products. The objective was to find the best, bring it back to Japan, and make it better.

For medical education and health care delivery however, there was no need to dispatch missions around the world; the German system was the overwhelming choice.

The 20th Century

For decades after the Meiji restoration all aspects of German medicine flowed into Japan. It was said: “There has never been an instance in history where a country not under colonial domination so completely adopted an outside system.

This influence culminated in the alignment of Japan with Germany in World War II. Toward the end of the war a German submarine delivered a culture of penicillin producing organisms to Japan. The collaboration was beneficial but in the end the war was a disaster and inhibited the development of health care for 20 years.

But then recovery proceeded faster than anyone predicted. When I came to Japan in 1970 there was in place since 1961 a compulsory health insurance system that provided equality of health care for everyone. Medical schools expanded to provide more doctors, discovery research for new medicines blossomed, and the measurements of health improved every year. Infant mortality decreased to the lowest in the world, and the life span of both men and women is among the highest.

Conclusion

Throughout history Japan has been somewhat of a mystery to Westerners. But history has at least one lesson worth remembering. Stated simply it is that some people, some institutions, and some companies do succeed and have enormous lasting influence.

Japan, Medicines, History, Attitudes, Outside influences, Practices, P Reed Maurer