

Adventures into Japanese health care



By [P Reed Maurer](#)

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This year my intensive use of the Japanese health care system continued apace with four operations, multiple doctor appointments, and enumerable test procedures, writes long-time Japan pharma watcher and president of International Alliances Limited P Reed Maurer in his exclusive column for The Pharma Letter.

The experience was further confirmation of the quality and affordability of the health care available for everyone in this country. The system works.

Available and accessible

Five hospitals are within walking distance of my home in Tokyo, and two others are 10 minutes away by car. Three of the seven are teaching hospitals with medical and nursing schools. Another specializes in cardiovascular diseases, and three have a full range of specialties. Additionally, there are many one-doctor clinics in my neighborhood.

None of the hospitals or clinics restrict access, all patients are welcome. And none treat patients on a private basis, they all participate in a universal health insurance system. Ditto for drugs, medical devices, procedures and tests. Participation is also mandatory for every person residing in Japan.

Thus, patients have the freedom to choose where they receive health care, but cannot opt out of the insurance system. Government managed insurance covers about one third of the population. Two thirds are covered by insurance provided by about 1,500 private insurers, but all operate under the same rules of patient cost and health care provider reimbursement. The patient cost for insurance is based on income, ie, the more you earn the more you pay. Patient out of pocket costs are generally 30%.

The bottom line is health care in Japan is accessible to all without causing bankruptcy for those who require treatment. The result is a healthy society by many measures.

Experience is the best teacher

What I learned as a patient follows.

* A cancer diagnosis is not a death sentence. Two of my four operations this year were to remove cancers. One was a malignant melanoma on my upper left arm, and the other a cancerous growth in my transverse colon. Over the years doctors told me I had cancer eight times. Three diagnoses turned out to be false positive upon further testing. The most recent was a lung cancer that disappeared from view via CT scans after three and nine months. The remaining five were treated successfully. The key is early diagnosis and thorough testing facilitated by Japan's user-friendly health care system.

* Remodeling body parts is possible. One operation was a remodeling of an enlarged prostate that was putting pressure on my bladder and if left untreated would eventually damage the kidneys. The procedure was done endoscopically and I was out of the hospital in one week.

The second was to receive a new titanium and ceramic hip replacement. This is invasive surgery via a 10cm long incision. Nevertheless, after one day I was walking down the corridor with the aid of a walker. After 11 days of rehabilitation I was fully mobile and pain free.

When I checked out of the hospital my out-of-pocket cost for everything was \$2,100. I gladly paid with my visa card and hailed a taxi to take me home.

* Unexcelled compassion and care. I receive care at the Jikei University Hospital, a short 10-minute drive from my home. Because Jikei has a medical school and nursing school there are plenty of care givers available at any time.

Doctors in Japan are very conservative, they order many tests to both confirm their diagnoses and the healing process. Hence the typical two-week stay in hospital.

Most impressive is the compassion, care and honest concern for the patients' well-being. The nurses do not speak English, but it doesn't matter because it is not what they say but what they do that is important. Treatment is not a business with a cash register at the end of the day. Rather it is carried out by people who truly care. They want you to leave the hospital better than when you came in.

Challenges ahead

The most serious challenge ahead for health care delivery in Japan is the decline and aging of the population. At age 80 I am a much more intensive user of the system than when I was 40 years old.

As the elderly represent a larger percentage of the population the cost to society for health care is and will be a major issue. The payers and providers of health care are now debating various proposals to keep the system solvent. Currently the cost of health care is about 9% of GDP, about half the US level. The Japanese are not eager to emulate the US system which many view as out of control.

Health care is considered a fundamental need to be provided to everyone regardless of income. It is a fact that the floor where I was hospitalized has private rooms that require payment of a hefty fee above what is covered by insurance. There are also four-bed rooms with a lower fee. I requested and received a six-bed room, no private bath or shower, but no additional fee.

Why? Because the close association with other patients is part of the experience of learning what makes this country tick. One lasting impression is the sensitivity toward others. My sleep was never disturbed by any of my five roommates or the coming and going of doctors and nurses.

What did I learn? Beyond the caring and compassion is a concern for others that must be in the Japanese genes because it is so persuasive.