

Increasing Cross-Sectoral Collaboration in Advocacy Efforts for Ear and Hearing Care Services

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Phase 1 Map: Japan





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Japan

Japan's population currently exceeds 122 million people.¹ Aligned with global trends, Japan's population continues to age with the median age forecasted to rise from 49.5 years in 2024 to 53.6 years by 2050.²

As of 2023, nearly a third of Japan's population was aged 65 years and older, equating to an estimated 36 million individuals.³ Based on projections by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), by 2050, 36.4% of Japan's population will be over 65, and 15.0% will be over 80 years of age.⁴

Subsequently, Japan faces an increasing number of older adults experiencing age-related hearing loss (ARHL). According to a 2012 study by Ronen Igakkai Zasshi et al., the prevalence of hearing loss rises sharply after the age of 65. The rates of hearing loss among older adults remains comparable for both men and women, with men experiencing slightly higher rates. Roughly 43.7% of men aged 65-69 years experience hearing loss compared to 73.3% of women.⁵ As of 2015, 42.2% of those aged 65 years or older were affected by hearing loss in Japan.⁶

Furthermore, studies show that reduced activity in the auditory neural pathways and decreased auditory processing due to hearing loss is a risk factor for depression, which may result in dementia, affecting 12.9% of those with hearing loss and isolation. Hearing loss is reported to be the most impactful modifiable factor for preventing dementia, thus addressing the social and individual costs associated with hearing loss is of utmost importance, since dementia stands as Japan's primary cause of disability.⁷ By 2025, it is projected that dementia will affect 7 million individuals, making up 20% of the population aged 65 years and older.⁸

Mandatory hearing check-ups for newborns and school children are in effect in Japan.⁴ Additionally, the annual Tokutei-Kenshin "specific health check-ups" for individuals aged 40-74 years are conducted to prevent non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and include hearing tests.⁹

From a 2022 survey it was found that only 38% of individuals discussed hearing loss with an Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) doctor or family doctor and only 14% of those individuals received hearing aids following recommendation from their doctor.¹⁰

National Aged Care Plan

Long-term Care Insurance

With a growing demand for long-term care services and facilities, Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW) launched the mandatory long-term care insurance (LTCI) in 2000 and has since provided benefits to more than 5 million people aged 65 years and older as of 2015.¹¹ The LTCI provides benefits for the long-term care (LTC) of older adults. Contributions to the program begin at age 40 through the payment of a premium, with individuals aged 65 years and older eligible to receive program benefits. Individuals aged 40 years and older who possess age-related disabilities such as hearing loss, may be eligible to receive benefits of the LTCI if they require LTC.⁸ The benefits include institutional, in-home, and community-based services widely ranging from private home care to welfare device subsidies such as hearing aids.¹²

Health Japan 21

Health Japan 21 (HJ21) is Japan's primary prevention strategy which aims to extend healthy life expectancy and reduce health disparities.¹³ The first term of the strategy ran from 2000 to 2012, and the second term, initiated in 2013, is currently in progress.^{4, 13} This nation-wide framework was established in response to the increasing prevalence of NCDs in Japan, including hearing loss. HJ21 aims to improve healthy habits through primary prevention interventions in workplaces, schools, and local communities to reduce the burden of disease across the life course.¹³ To achieve HJ21's second term targets, the Tokutei-Kenshin "specific health check-ups" are available to a limited number of municipalities suggested annually for those aged 40-74 years with health insurance. Health check-ups for those aged 75 years and older does not include a hearing test.¹⁵

National Dementia Care Strategies

The New Orange Plan

The New Orange Plan, also known as The Comprehensive Strategy for the Promotion of Dementia Measures, was established in January 2015. The New Orange Plan aims to promote dementia-friendly communities and improve living environments of individuals with dementia, helping them remain in familiar environments for as long as possible. Hence, the plan is based on the utilization of Integrated Community Care Systems (ICCS).¹⁶ ICCS are networks that coordinate health and social services within a community, promoting collaboration among healthcare providers and community organizations to enhance care coordination and support independence in community settings.¹⁷ Key objectives of The New Orange Plan are to: raise awareness and promote understanding of dementia, reinforce measures for early-onset dementia, provide timely healthcare and long-term care services as the individual advances through dementia stages, build age-friendly communities for older adults including people living with dementia, support dementia caregivers, promote dementia-based research and development, and prioritize the perspectives of individuals with dementia and their families. While specific details on hearing and ear care strategies are not explicitly mentioned, it is plausible that hearing health could be considered within the broader context of improving overall quality of life for individuals with dementia.

The National Framework for Promotion of Dementia Policies

The National Framework for Promotion of Dementia Policies was initiated in June 2019, and as of today is Japan's most recent national strategy for dementia. This strategy highlights the needs and considerations of older adults with dementia. Although this framework shares a similar philosophy with The New Orange Plan, they differ widely. The National Framework for the Promotion of Dementia Policies is more comprehensive than The New Orange Plan, as it focuses on inclusion, prevention, and a concept of "Dementia barrier-free" spaces (e.g. secure transportation methods, housing security, dementia-related private insurance), key terms which were not prominent in the previous national strategy. This framework introduces new priorities such as knowledge translation at an international level through the dissemination of their research. The new national framework has updated various targets with the objective of achieving health equity in Japan's support system. There is no explicit mention of hearing and ear care strategies, however national frameworks for dementia policies include provisions for comprehensive care, which could encompass hearing and ear care, especially considering their relevance to the quality of life of individuals with dementia.¹⁸

National Hearing Care Strategies

Japan does not have a specific national hearing care strategy or framework for older adults. Most nationwide hearing-based initiatives or strategies focus solely on newborns and school-aged children. It is of note that Japan's ruling party has published the Japan Hearing Vision, and the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare has been implementing measures based on their recommendations. It is of note that the MHLW promotes specific initiatives for the health of Japanese citizens, including free or subsidized hearing screenings and noise awareness campaigns emphasizing ear protection for employees working in noisy environments.^{4, 18, 20}

Japan Hearing Vision

As of 2020, the Parliamentarians' League for the Promotion of Hearing Loss Measures (Nanchogiren) has formed the Japan Hearing Vision proposal. The government has been implementing recommendations from this proposal. The Japan Hearing Vision aims to establish a society where no one with hearing loss is left behind and can live a fulfilling in Japan. The proposal consists of three main pillars prioritizing measures against hearing loss across the life course and according to the life cycle from before birth to old age. The proposal specifically aims to achieve this through several measures including early detection and diagnosis of children with hearing loss, prevention of hearing loss due to noise, enhancement of support, development of human resources to support hearing loss countermeasures, promotion of research and development of hearing loss-related medical devices, and understanding various hearing conditions. Age-related initiatives include group meetings for older adults with hearing loss to support awareness and education, providing education to health care providers to disseminate sufficient information on age-induced hearing loss and encouraging seeing ENT specialists early to the older adult population.²⁰

Universal Health Insurance

Japan's universal health insurance system ensures comprehensive healthcare coverage for nearly all residents, including older adults. The insurance system encompasses essential services in audiology and hearing health, including consultations with healthcare professionals like speech therapists (gengo chokaku shi) and otolaryngologists, diagnostic tests such as audiometry, and treatments such as hearing aids and cochlear implants. These services are typically covered under the insurance plans, although specific coverage details may vary based on individual insurance policies and the severity of the hearing loss. Additionally, the system includes rehabilitation services aimed at improving the quality of life for individuals with hearing impairments, ensuring comprehensive care across various healthcare disciplines in Japan.²¹

NHS Programs

Implemented in the early 2000s by the MHLW, newborn hearing screening (NHS) programs have been established throughout the country as a means of achieving early detection for hearing impairment. A recommended benchmark by the Joint Committee on Infant Hearing, is to strive for a 1-2-3 timeline (testing by one month, diagnosis by two months, and intervention by three months of age). One of their main objectives with this program is to ensure maximum levels of language acquisition for children with hearing impairment. A recently published report from 2019 reflects the vast uptake of this benefit, with a screening rate of 90.8% among this group.

Japan aims to reach a national screening rate target of >95%. The NHS program provides coverage solely for all newborns and does not include coverage for older adults.²²

Civil Society Organization Engagement

Age Care-Related CSOs

Hope

Hope is a non-profit organization (NPO) based in Japan. Hope's goal is to create a society where older adults can live freely and vibrantly. Key initiatives targeted towards older adults include long-term care insurance services, community life support services, events volunteering, remote sign language interpretation, and online sign language classes. Additionally, they offer various educational courses to advocate for their mission, including courses on ageing and sign language courses. Although there is no mention of hearing or ear health-related initiatives, Hope focuses on initiatives for the deaf, particularly through sign language promotion.²³

Japan Organization for Employment of the Elderly Persons with Disabilities and Job Seekers

The Japan Organization for Employment of the Elderly Persons with Disabilities and Job Seekers (JEED) was formed in 2003. JEED aims to create a society in which everyone, regardless of age or disability can exercise their skills and work with motivation. JEED provides comprehensive support to various users including older adults, individuals with disabilities, and job seekers. Specifically, the JEED aids in promotion of vocational rehabilitation services for individuals with disabilities, levy grant systems for employing individuals with disabilities and older adults, and educational activities concerning disability employment or employment of older adults. Hearing or ear care-related initiatives are not mentioned but given the comprehensive nature of support that JEED provides to its disabled and older adult members, such initiatives may be included.²⁴

Japanese Social Services

Japanese Social Services (JSS) are a non-profit organization for individuals seeking senior support, counselling, family support, domestic violence support, life and safety resources, and online programs. The programs for older adults are primarily geared towards those aged 65 years or older. These programs include hot lunch services, singing groups, yoga groups, online seminars, and visit programs for older adults living in isolation. There is no mention of hearing or ear health-related initiatives at JSS.²⁵

Momonokai

Momonokai is an NPO-run café and community initiative in Japan specifically designed for older adults. Momonokai aims to bring the community activities older adult residents. Momonokai provides a vibrant space where older adults can interact with young students. This café prioritizes their nutritional health and serves healthy daily lunchboxes. The café aims to be a local hub where events, lectures, and social gatherings can take place.

This initiative has been successful for older adults to get socially involved and make friends. There is no mention of hearing or ear health-related initiatives at Momonokai.²⁶

Dementia-Related CSOs

Dementia-related CSOs in Japan include the Dementia Friendly Japan Initiative (DFJI), Alzheimer's Association Japan (AAJ), and Japan Dementia Persons Working Group (JDWG). Discussions of hearing and ear care services are minimal with no hearing health-related initiatives at present.

Alzheimer's Association Japan

AAJ is a national organization formed in 1980 by families who care for individuals living with dementia. The AAJ has more than 11,000 members comprising of families, individuals living with dementia, and professionals. The AAJ offers dementia-based activities and services, such as gatherings, newsletters, and telephone consultations. These initiatives allow individuals living with dementia to share concerns and promote discussions, allow connections to be formed, and offer professional counselling.²⁷

Japan Dementia Persons Working Group

The JDWG is an incorporated association established in 2017, which aims to create a local community where individuals with dementia can continue to live with hope and dignity. The JDWG have created a platform where individuals with dementia can become active participants as members of their community. Individuals can opt for a general or supporting membership. General members are individuals with dementia who agree with the purpose of the organization and support the social activities of individuals with dementia. Supporting members are shareholders including individuals and corporations who assist in the corporation's activities. The JDWG is engaged in several dementia-related initiatives such as *The Declaration of Hope for Living with Dementia* and the *Supporting Noto! Small Voices Project*.²⁸

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