

Healthy Japan 21

JMAJ 46(2): 47–49, 2003

Hideya SAKURAI

Executive Board Member, Japan Medical Association

Key words: National health promotion; Life-long health project; Investment in health

Background of New Concepts

The Ministry of Health and Welfare (currently the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare) has been working to prepare infrastructure that will enhance the health of the Japanese people by establishing a system of medical check-ups for the elderly, creating local health centers and other facilities, and training fitness instructors, as a part of the “First-phase Measures for National Health Promotion” begun in 1978 and the “Second-phase Measures for National Health Promotion” begun in 1988.

Based on the results of these efforts to promote health and on public health activities taking place both inside and outside Japan, a task force to plan Healthy Japan 21 and a task force to set up the Healthy Japan 21 Project were organized in November 1999, drawing together a number of experts sanctioned by the Public Health Council. Issues were discussed by the task forces for about one and a half years, and the results of their activities were compiled in the Report of the Task Forces for Planning Healthy Japan 21 and Framing the Healthy Japan 21 Project.

On the basis of these reports, the Ministry of Health and Welfare issued a communication

from the permanent vice-minister for health and welfare entitled “National Health Promotion Movement in the 21st Century (Healthy Japan 21)” on March 31, 2001. The Ministry selected as targets of the Tertiary National Health Promotion Movement issues relevant to improving cancer, heart disease, stroke, lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes mellitus, and underlying lifestyle factors, and provided goals for these targets, aiming at implementation by 2010. These actions facilitated and extended the health promotion movement, in which self-motivated individuals are involved in their own health and quality of life, and solicited widespread cooperation and support from private associations and various administrative bodies.

This large-scale project to promote national health is what is known by the term “Healthy Japan 21.”

Basic Policies and Goals

The four basic policies of “Healthy Japan 21” are as follows: (1) the importance of primary prevention; (2) creation of a supportive environment for the enhancement of health; (3) goal setting and assessment; and (4) the promotion

of effective, well-coordinated activities by the various implementing bodies.

These activities are intended to cover nine specific areas: (1) diet and nutrition; (2) physical activity and exercise; (3) leisure and mental health; (4) smoking; (5) alcohol; (6) dental health; (7) diabetes; (8) cardiovascular disease; and (9) cancer.

Because these activities are slated to be implemented nationwide, the organizations responsible for their implementation, including local public organizations, are expected to formulate goals that are held in common among the participating organizations and are relevant to their actual situations, while keeping in mind the overall goals of Healthy Japan 21. The goals for promoting the health of participants should be individual and specific, based on the participant's health status and view of good health, also with reference to the overall goals of the project. The proposed goals are expected to be expanded or reviewed as occasion demands.

In addition, under the heading "Promotion of health in communities" Healthy Japan 21 has directed that specific plans for the promotion of health be formulated in the manner best suited to the actual situation of that particular area (local plans) by enlisting the cooperation of residents and various community health organizations, in order to effectively promote the plan.

Problems

The author participated as a member of all the task forces and committees responsible for development of the "Healthy Japan 21" project (Task Force for Planning Healthy Japan 21, Task Force for Framing the Healthy Japan 21 Project, Expert Committee for Framing the Healthy Japan 21 Project, and Public Health Council).

While fully appreciating the importance of the Healthy Japan 21 project, the author also would like to point out certain issues raised by the project.

- (1) The project places too much emphasis on measures against lifestyle-related diseases (formerly called adult diseases), focusing its attention on a healthy adult life while disregarding measures for maternal and child health, infant health, and the health of schoolchildren. In response to such criticism, the "Healthy Parent and Child 21" project was hastily formulated, but it is mainly a supplementary, patchwork plan.
- (2) The importance of primary prevention received too much emphasis. In particular, Task Force for Planning presented certain negative opinions as to the contributions made by the medical community in prolonging the life span of Japanese people and questioned some of the benefits of secondary prevention. Eventually, however, these views were altered to a great extent, reflecting the opinions of the Japan Medical Association and other critics.
- (3) Another criticism was that the project imitated similar projects in other countries, as represented by "Healthy People 2000" in the U.S., and was not an original Japanese health plan designed specifically for the Japanese people.
- (4) Although this project is one that aims at promoting health and fostering independent, individual participation, there is a great deal of national and local government involvement. It is also problematic that the national government set forth basic principles for the formulation of local plans that were intended to be specific to the realities of the particular region.

Policies of the Japan Medical Association

On the other hand, the Japan Medical Association (JMA) is proposing a life-long health project as one of its five specific plans for medical structural reform. The plan is grounded in a report issued in March 1998 by the Health Investment Project Committee (formed in 1997

by JMA), "Systematization of activities of maintaining and promoting life-long health."

The life-long health projects proposed by JMA are based on the idea that health is a form of capital, and the promotion of health projects throughout the life span is actually an investment in health. JMA has offered the following two suggestions based on the idea of investment in health: (1) enactment of the Basic Health Law and (2) the value of daily clinical practice.

In addition, the specific themes of life-long health projects cited by JMA include (1) measures against lifestyle-related diseases as primary prevention, (2) improvement of health examinations as secondary prevention, (3) guidance based on the results of health examinations as secondary prevention, and (4) prevention of the development or aggravation of illness and recovery of impaired function.

In addition, it was decided that health projects should cover the entire life span and involve all periods of life, from the fetal stage (including the health of the expectant mother) to infancy, childhood, puberty, and adolescence, young adulthood, middle and late middle age,

and advanced and late advanced age.

Based on the above concerns, JMA considers Healthy Japan 21 to lack the concept of health as an investment, as proposed in JMA's life-long health projects.

Unlike previous projects on maternal and child health, school health, industrial health, and elder health, Healthy Japan 21 has not been implemented to conform to laws that have already been enacted; rather, it is being promoted through the spontaneous participation of individuals, communities, and groups, who then set and accomplish goals. In this regard, the project should expand its horizons in order to fulfill its mission, namely, promotion of people's health in the 21st century.

Therefore, for Healthy Japan 21 to succeed, it is vitally important that family physicians, who are familiar with community health needs, and JMA, which has as its mission the support of family physicians, take part and cooperate in the project.

It is desirable that Healthy Japan 21 be promoted through strategies that are aligned with the purpose of the life-long health projects proposed by JMA.