

“Ninchishō: how a super-aged society is approaching dementia”

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, with the population over 65 years growing faster, the prevalence of dementia is on the rise. Japan has been described as the leading country with a “super-aged society”. This paper aims to investigate the different approaches Japan has put in place as well as the plans for the future to support their citizens with dementia. In order to do this, a multiple-perspective analysis is needed where the role of different aspects of society are considered. This will be done by evaluating the outcomes of multiple scholarly articles and publications in the field. The analysis will be divided in three main sections that represent three different approaches already developed in the Japanese society: national measures, community-based approaches, and technological advances. It will discuss how the initiatives already put into place have given positive or negative results as well as where there is some room for improvement. The importance of this study lies in that dementia is affecting a large portion of the global population and learning about what other countries are doing can be a valuable source for improvement in our own countries.

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Nearly 27% of the Japanese population is over 65 years old and the number of people diagnosed with any type of dementia is on the rise[1]. In 2012, 4.62 million Japanese people were suffering from dementia. By 2025, this number is expected to be 7 million[2]. Japan has put in place multiple initiatives ranging from national policies, community-based approaches to the development of technological tools. These initiatives do not only help the person suffering from dementia, but they also aim to support the families and caregivers. As this is a growing issue, the plans are still being developed.

METHODS

The study is divided into 3 approaches which have helped the Japanese population navigate with dementia. Examining both national- and local level improvements are critical because both can complement each other, leading to more successful outcomes. Technological advances are also relevant to evaluate since they can facilitate the care both at home and in healthcare facilities.

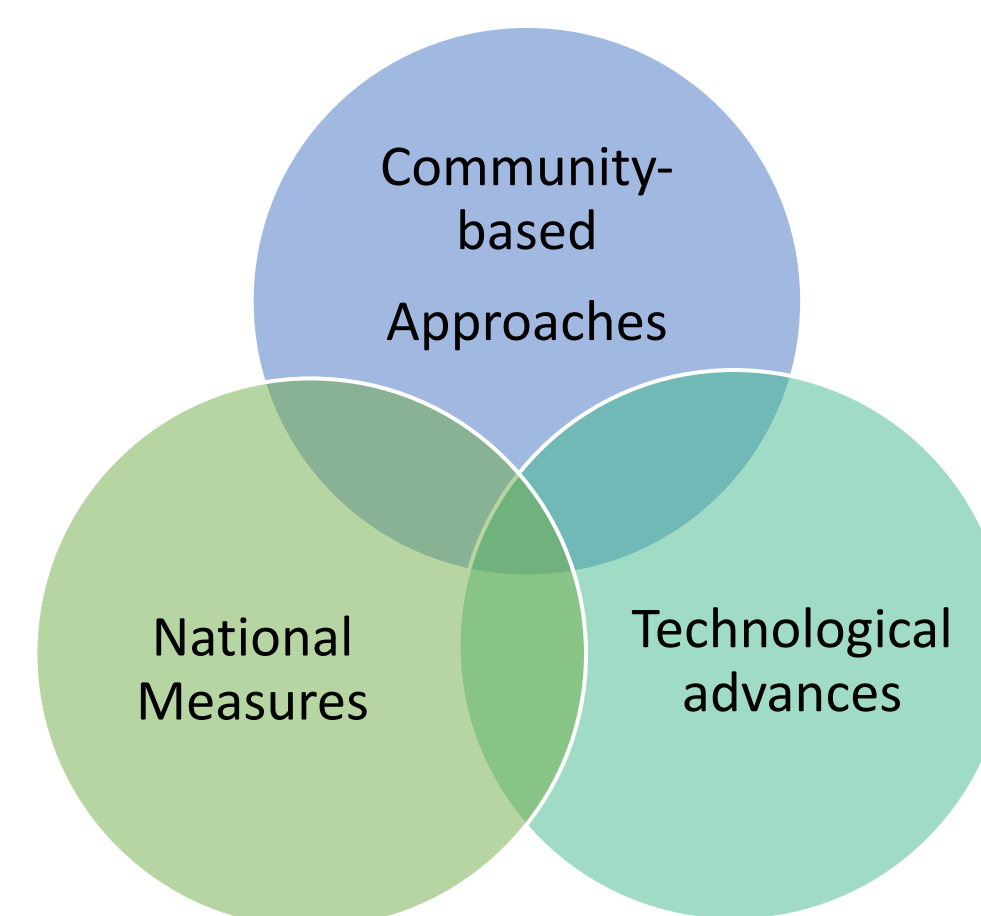


Diagram 1. Representation of the three main areas tackling dementia in Japan.

RESULTS

National Measures

Various policies have been implemented and further developed to fit the needs of the population suffering from dementia.

- 2000: National Long-term Care Insurance System (LTCI) [3]
 - cover dementia patients and preventive services
 - Lack of early diagnosis and access to care services
- 2008: Emergency Project for Improvement of Medical Care and Quality of Life for People with Dementia [4]
 - establishment of Medical Centers for Dementia

- 2012: Five-Year Plan for Promotion of Measures Against Dementia (Orange Plan) [4]

- dementia coordinators in local governments
- patients receive home visits (advice & information)

Dementia-friendly communities

- In 2012 there were less than 50 dementia-friendly cafés in the whole country, this number increased to more than 4000 in 2017. The attendees of these cafés are people diagnosed with dementia, relatives, community members, and experts in the field. The cafés are a great place to interchange experiences and find support [5].
- A virtual reality (VR) program allowed participants to have a first-person dementia experience. This can help reduce stigma towards dementia, promote empathy and a sense of community [6].
- Matsudo has turned into a safe city for the old adult population and caregivers, where they can feel comfortable living in. The orange patrol receives training on how to recognize elderly people that might be lost on the streets or certain behaviors of individuals developing dementia [7].

Technology

A third of the dementia cases can be prevented. One of these causes has been attributed to social isolation and physical/cognitive inactivity. To help with this, better communication devices, home security programs, and robots (“Pepper”) for companionship have started to be used [1].

Early-stage to moderate-stage of dementia: “Real time” symptoms trackers have been proposed, where wearables provide instant feedback from both care partners and patients. This easy accessibility can improve the quality of treatment and independent living. Multiple software such as geolocators, electronic diaries, and medication reminders have also been developed [1].

Advanced stage: technology is used to counteract the labor shortage the dementia facilities are facing by transferring patients from beds to wheelchairs, assisting in toiletry, bathing activities and monitoring patients [1].

DISCUSSION

Each area discussed has a relevant role in tackling dementia. The national measures show the need for a comprehensive long-term care plan from preventive services throughout the development of the disease. The various local initiatives play a key role in the daily-lives of the patients and caregivers by reducing the stigma, forming connections with fellow citizens, and turning communities into dementia-friendly cities. Technology provides another layer of support by facilitating the care and prevention of the disease. More importantly, the coming together of the three of them is what makes this approach to dementia strong. As a dementia patient and caregivers, having the support from the community as well from the government, can make this experience more manageable.

CONCLUSIONS

Japan is taking a leading role in managing dementia as well as preparing for its projected increase. The community has a relevant supporting role that has made the Japanese approach exceptional. Tackling this issue from multiple approaches is something positive about the Japanese response and could be applied in other countries.

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