

Breast cancer lurks in

Japan begins to recognize menace; Jolie effect is a help

FOCUS

Tomoko Otake
STAFF WRITER

For years, Makiko Dazai had nagging questions about her sister's death from ovarian cancer in 2008.

Dazai, a 46-year-old housewife from Kiyose, western Tokyo, said her sister had been taking great care of herself, eating healthily and undergoing regular health checkups. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2004.

"My sister would choose to eat low-pesticide vegetables and brown rice," Dazai recalled of her sister, who was a year older than herself. "She would only drink a little occasionally and didn't smoke. If she had developed cancer because of her lifestyle, I thought everyone would."

Back then, few people in Japan, except for a small group of experts in the field, were aware of hereditary breast and ovarian cancer (HBOC), which is caused by mutations of certain genes, including those known as BRCA1 and BRCA2.

According to the U.S. National Cancer Institute, the risk of breast cancer in people with mutations in either BRCA1 or BRCA2 is five times higher than normal. The risk of ovarian cancer for such people is believed to be even higher, about 10 to 30 times the average.

Dazai was one of those who had never heard of HBOC, but when a 5-mm tumor was discovered in her left breast in 2011, she immediately suspected a genetic link. She sought out a specialist at National Cancer Center Ariake Hospital in Tokyo and took a BRCA test there. The test confirmed she carries a mutation in the BRCA1 gene. Her sister, on the other hand, never had a chance to take such a test so the cause of her ovarian cancer remains unknown.

"When I tested positive, I felt relieved," said Dazai, who has had her left breast removed. "I felt I found an answer I had been searching for. My cancer had genetic, not environmental, roots."

Dazai is one of the lucky ones. Many women remain unaware of their genetic risks, experts say, even though 5 to 10 percent of the 73,000 newly diagnosed breast cancers in Japan every year are believed to be the hereditary type.

In recent years, awareness has rapidly grown, thanks in part to the "Angelina Jolie effect."



UNHCR special envoy Angelina Jolie and her son Pax arrive at a sensation in 2013 when she announced she underwent a double mastectomy.

The U.S. actress caused a sensation worldwide in 2013 when she announced that she underwent a double mastectomy to avoid the risk of breast cancer. Jolie, too, has a BRCA1 mutation. In March, she announced she had also had her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed to avoid the risk of ovarian cancer.

"Angelina Jolie had a profound impact on Japan's approach to HBOC," said Dr. Seigo Nakamura, head of Showa University Hospital Breast Center in Tokyo and the nation's foremost authority on breast cancer research.

Jolie's announcement in 2013 happened to come right after Nakamura presented the

Preventive breast removal, which costs between ¥700,000 and ¥1 million, is also not covered by public insurance.

Nakamura said he has been lobbying the government to subsidize at least part of the costs by including the procedures as part of the *senshin iryo* (advanced medical care) scheme, which would help reduce the financial burden on patients by around 40 percent.

To qualify for government support, doctors must prove that the procedures help to reduce patient mortality. As it is, there is insufficient epidemiological data on Japanese patients, Nakamura said.

"In the West, there is enough data on the link between pre-

Genetic screening and mastectomies are not subsidized here because insufficient data exists on the mortality of Japanese women. The link is widely acknowledged in the West.

results of a two-year study in Japan on hereditary breast cancer at an international conference.

"It was really a watershed moment, in that it helped raise the awareness in the government and even among breast cancer specialists," he said of Jolie's move.

But there is still a long way to go. The genetic screening for HBOC is not covered by Japan's public health insurance scheme, meaning people taking the test must pay the cost in full — between ¥200,000 and ¥300,000.



Akemi Hirayama, a single mother who works parttime at Kikuya, checks clothing at a facility in Matsubushi, Saitama Prefecture. YOSHIKI MIURA

With flextime, work at laundry firm not too pressing, single moms say

Magdalena Osumi
STAFF WRITER

Since joining the laundering company Kikuya in 1995, Akemi Hirayama says she has never missed a day of work.

Hirayama, who works at a Kikuya facility in Matsubushi, Saitama Prefecture, was commended for her 10 years of service with the company this month.

When times are busiest, the 45-year-old part-timer handles 300 to 400 bags of clothes a day. All items need to be thoroughly checked before washing to ensure the buttons are sewn on securely. They need to be checked again afterward, to see whether the stains have been removed.

As a single mother raising a 15-year-old daughter, Hirayama said she was happy to work as a part-timer because the company's system allows her to set her own working hours.

She took the role after getting divorced.

"I knew I would need to raise my child on my income alone," Hirayama said. "If I were employed full time, my duties and responsibilities would not allow me to devote my time to my child if something happens to her."

Kikuya, based in Tokyo's Adachi Ward, has branches in Tokyo and Saitama Prefecture. While laundry service is a male-dominated industry, 90 percent of Kikuya's roughly 200 workers are female, and 85 percent of the women work part time, said Kikuya President Shinichi Nakahata.

The women who work part time are less inclined to quit than those who work full time, he added.

Kikuya celebrates its 60th anniversary next year. It has tried hard to make the workplace more suitable for women, especially working mothers.

Among measures taken to

lighten the load, the company has replaced stick-shift delivery cars with vehicles with automatic transmission, and has developed lighter, easier-to-operate steam presses.

It also introduced a system more than a decade ago to allow women to bring their school-age children to the workplace after school.

Kikuya promotes workers regardless of their type of contract, enabling high-performing nonregular employees to become managers or team leaders.

Nakahata calls its employment system "order-made," saying it enables employees to work according to their own will.

"It would be a waste if skilled women who have the right to have and raise their children did not have a chance to use those skills," said Nakahata, 52, himself the father of three children.

He said Kikuya plans to open nursery schools near its facilities so that working mothers can have their children taken care of at relatively affordable prices.

Mothers will not have to pay market rates, as the company will cover some of the costs itself.

Nakahata said it has been hiring an increasing number of single mothers in recent years, mirroring their rise in the wider population.

"Single mothers are usually more devoted to their work, but they lack support in many areas."

Hirayama said single mothers receive government assistance to pay for their children's education, but such benefits discourage some mothers from working, because the amount varies depending on their annual income.

Miyuki Yoshida, 48, another single mother who has worked there for 15 years, was the first to start bringing her daughter

to the office. The girl was in elementary school at the time and is now aged 21.

Yoshida began working full time when her daughter entered junior high school and has now become the company's board member in charge of strategies to reduce costs and improve workflow.

Yoshida believes more single moms would like to use their full potential, but many simply stay at home and expect the government to cover the costs of child-rearing and education.

"Those who rely only on support from the government put all single mothers, including women who work really hard, in a bad light," she said.

In addition to giving financial assistance, it is important to create an environment that makes it easier for single mothers to work at the same time as raising their children, she said.

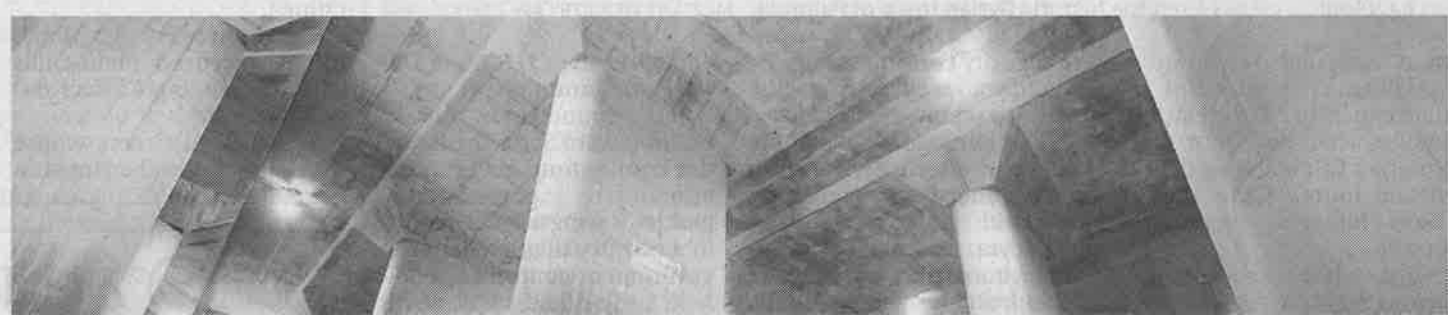
Among Kikuya's employees are workers from overseas, including China and Vietnam, and some of them have been promoted to higher positions.

Two years ago, Kikuya opened a branch in Thailand, which covers 14 separate facilities. It introduced there the flexible working conditions that proved so successful in Japan.

"Our policy is to let workers build a happy family and make it their top priority, as I believe that if someone's private life is not fulfilled, he or she would not be able to work efficiently," Nakahata said. "It's difficult to get people interested in working for a laundry firm, but I hope we can get more people who want to work at Kikuya."

"In the past, children used to be brought up in communities with help from elderly people in the neighborhood. This is the characteristic of Japan's culture, which I want to bring back to life," Nakahata said.

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Single mom Akemi Hirayama sheds tears of joy at an appreciation ceremony on Sept. 17 at her workplace in Matsubushi, Saitama Prefecture, where she poses surrounded by her colleagues including her boss Miyuki Yoshida (second from left) and CEO Shinichi Nakahata (center). | YOSHIKAKI MIURA

Laundry firm's flexibility cited as reason why single moms don't quit

BY MAGDALENA OSUMI STAFF WRITER

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CLJF - 3 days ago Would be great to see the Kikuya approach become more widespread so that Japan better utilizes its female workforce.

Paul Johnny Lynn - 4 days ago Hopefully some of the old nay-sayers will see from this that it CAN be done.

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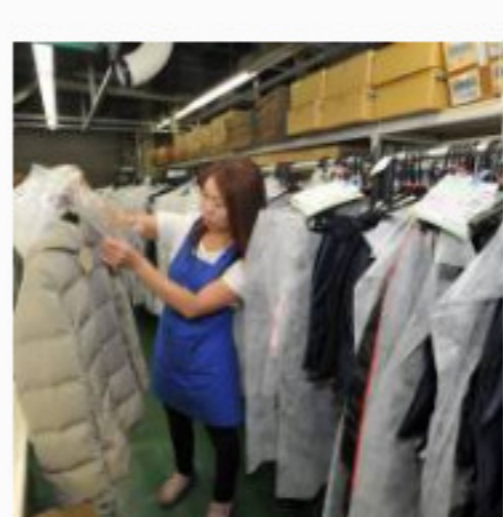
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