

The future of inbound medical care as gauged from the foreigners undergoing complete medical examinations in Japan

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Abstract: Complete medical examinations are a system of preventive medicine unique to Japan. In recent years, Japanese and foreigners have been aware of complete medical examinations. However, the extent to which this concept of comprehensive medical checkup is recognized in different countries is unknown. The National Center for Global Health and Medicine (NCGM) is a facility that has been performing complete medical examinations on inbound visitors since May 2016, and more than 3,500 inbound visitors have been received to date. Based on this track record, the current study analyzed trends in foreigners' demand for medical checkups in Japan. From August 2020 to July 2023, 471 foreign residents in Japan from 22 countries were received. A certain proportion of examinees (approximately 30%) underwent examinations multiple times at a frequency of once a year. In addition, inbound medical visitors resumed starting in January 2023, and 158 inbound examinees were received. Of these, 15.2% of examinees had undergone a complete medical examination at the NCGM before the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that inbound medical visitors and foreign residents may regularly undergo complete medical examinations. In order to continue to meet this demand, Japanese medical facilities should enhance their system for receiving such examinees.

Keywords: complete medical examinations, inbound medical care, foreigner, foreign residents

Introduction

Complete medical examinations are a system of preventive medicine unique to Japan that contribute to health maintenance and early detection of diseases (1). Moreover, as Japanese people's awareness of health has increased in recent years, demand has increased not only for medical checkups at schools and companies but also for comprehensive checkups that allow for more detailed medical examinations (2). That said, inbound visitors underwent medical checkups in Japan (1) even before the COVID-19 outbreak (3). Japanese medical facilities have also identified a business opportunity, and the number of facilities that have prepared systems to accept those visitors has increased in recent years (1,4). However, the extent to which this concept of a complete medical examination is recognized in different countries is unknown.

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Trends in and characteristics of foreigners' demand for medical checkups in Japan: Data from the NCGM

Based on the Japanese Government's inbound tourism policy, the NCGM has been actively receiving many inbound medical visitors since 2016 (1,5). However, inbound demand ceased due to the COVID-19 pandemic (6). Foreigners mainly from China and Vietnam were already aware of the NCGM, but in response to the pandemic the facility immediately changed its policy to actively receive foreigners living in Japan (1,5). By providing free medical interpreting services, a new system was created to meet the needs of foreigners living in Japan who cannot speak Japanese.

As a result, foreign residents in Japan from a total of 22 countries accounted for 471 (5.1%) of 9,299 total medical check-ups from August 2020 to July 2023. The breakdown included 314 Chinese, 66 Koreans, 15 Vietnamese, 12 Americans, 10 British, 9 French, 6 Filipinos, 5 Canadians, 5 Thais, 5 Bangladeshis, 5 Germans, 4 Kenyans, 4 Israelis, 4 Mongolians, 2 Bulgarians, 2 Brazilians, 2 Myanmarese, 1 Swiss, 1 Singaporean, 1 Peruvian, 1 Russian, and 1 Swede. There were 150 people (31.8%) who needed language support,

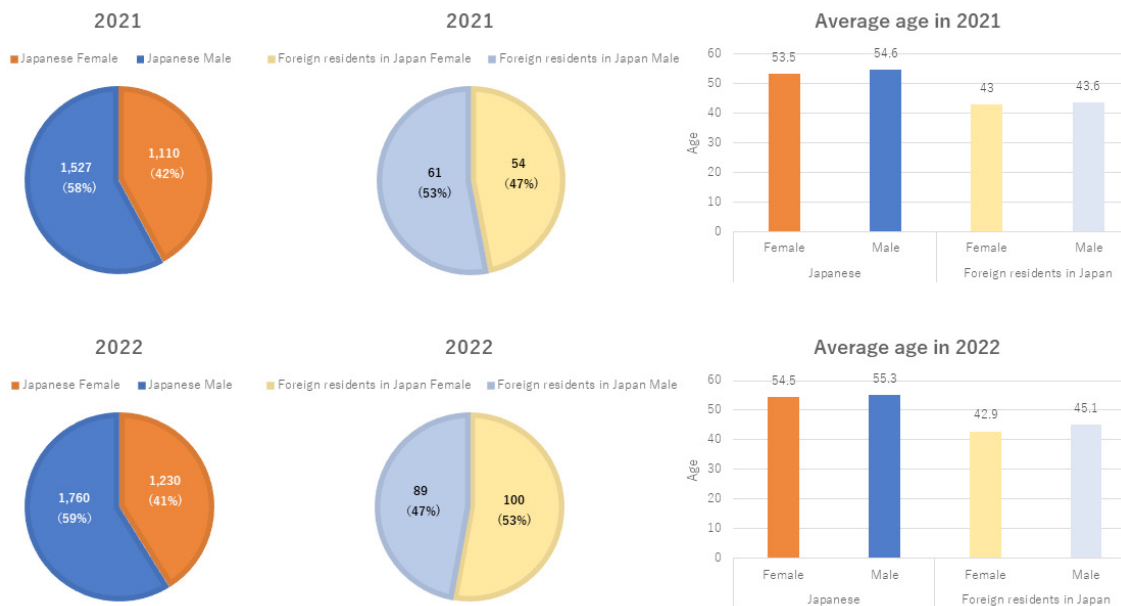


Figure 1. Characteristics of examinees from 2021-2022. Foreign residents in Japan accounted for a higher proportion of female examinees than did Japanese, and the average age of both men and women was about 10 years younger.

and the main languages were Chinese, English, and Vietnamese.

The current study compared data from 2021 and 2022 and analyzed the state of foreign examinees residing in Japan (5). Results indicated that the total number of people undergoing a complete medical examination increased 13.8%. In contrast, the number of foreign residents undergoing a complete medical examination increased markedly (64.3%). By country, there was a notable increase in Chinese and Koreans.

The characteristics of foreign residents in Japan were similar to those in 2021, as were previously reported (5). In 2022, a higher percentage of foreign residents receiving medical checkups were female compared to Japanese examinees, and the average age of both men and women was about 10 years younger (Figure 1). Moreover, results revealed that a certain number (approximately 30%) of examinees undergo examinations multiple times, and the frequency of such visits is once a year. In Japan, annual checkups such as checkups at schools and companies are compulsory, and this seems to have become a cultural habit. Similarly, the concept of medical checkups, which involves not only single checkups but also regular checkups, is spreading among foreign residents in Japan (Figure 2).

With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, complete medical examinations for inbound medical visitors resumed at the NCGM starting in January 2023. There were 158 inbound examinees (38.2% Vietnamese, 61.7% Chinese) in total, 24 (15.2%) of whom had previously undergone medical checkups at the NCGM before the COVID-19 outbreak (Figure 2). Accordingly, medical checkups in Japan for inbound medical tourists seem to be more than a fashionable experience and are instead becoming more common as a regular checkup, just like

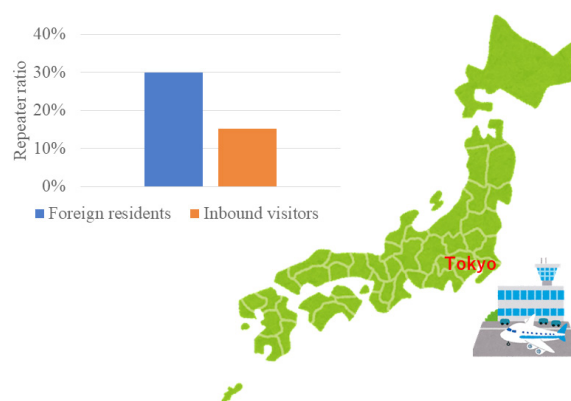


Figure 2. Awareness of medical checkups among foreigners. In recent years, Japanese and foreigners have been aware of complete medical examinations. A certain number of foreigners undergo repeat checkups at the same facility performing complete medical examinations.

for foreigners residing in Japan. Thus, analyzing the trends in medical examinations undergone by foreigners residing in Japan and inbound visitors will help to predict inbound medical tourists undergoing medical checkups on a regular basis, and that information will be extremely useful when considering the state of medical checkups in the future.

The future of inbound medical care as gauged from the foreigners undergoing complete medical examinations in Japan

Based on the current results, awareness of checkups appears to be widespread among both foreign residents and inbound tourists. The average level of medical care in Japan, based on universal health insurance (7), is higher than in other countries (8), and as long as

this situation continues, demand from foreigners for checkups such as complete medical examinations in Japan will continue to increase. This has the potential to become a major pillar supporting the Japanese economy. New economic benefits are expected not only for those receiving medical care and hospitals but also in various areas including food, clothing, and housing as a result of their arrival in Japan.

In order to continue meeting this demand in the future, the hope is that medical facilities receiving foreigners will enhance their system for doing so. Inbound medical tourists may experience problems during examinations, financial troubles, and various other complaints due to language and cultural differences. As a countermeasure, the NCGM started an innovative medical interpreter registration system in October 2020 to assist inbound visitors. As of July 2023, a total of 103 interviews were conducted, a total of 198 medical interpreters who have passed Level N1 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test have been registered (9), and 84 companies have been certified by the NCGM. This system allows patients to be accompanied by an interpreter with a wealth of medical knowledge who understands hospital rules and Japanese culture through a company that is highly skilled in dealing with inbound tourists. This ensures the quality of interpreting, allows the hospital to receive accurate health information from the patient in a short period of time, and allows the patient to appropriately communicate the purpose of the examination, method of testing, and results. Building such a mutually beneficial relationship should help ensure that checkups satisfy both the examinees and the examiners. Currently, the NCGM has resumed checkups and continues to accept inbound visitors without any trouble, and this system for quality assurance has been effective. Therefore, this seems to be one of the important factors that has allowed the NCGM to grow into one of the most successful facilities performing complete medical examinations for inbound visitors to Japan both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the above achievements and experiences, we would like to point out the problems and points that need to be reformed in Japan's current system of inbound medical care. First, given that the demand for inbound medical care is expected to continue to increase, hospitals currently have difficulty allocating staff to handle inbound visitors. Therefore, the NCGM's system, in which some of these tasks are outsourced to certified companies and medical interpreters and the hospital coordinates them, is one way to accommodate the increasing number of inbound medical tourists. In addition, Japan's inbound medical care is broadly divided into four categories: (A) disease treatment, (B) checkups such as complete medical examinations, (C) cosmetic treatments such as plastic surgery, and (D) life-prolonging care such as stem cell injections and

blood purification. In areas such as (D), where there are issues with implementation standards and evidence of effectiveness, if the development is delayed, then (A), (B), and (C) may also be adversely affected. We believe that there is an urgent need for interventions such as management of certification by the department in charge of medical care.

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