

Safe Way Back

Ayumu Oshima
Keio Univ. ESS

Ladies and gentlemen, where did you go on your holidays last summer? To the seaside to swim and sunbathe? Did you hike in the mountains? Or did you go to a nice cool village like Karuizawa and play tennis?

I went to mental hospitals.

You see, apart from the E.S.S., I also belong to Ochi-ken, the traditional Japanese comic story telling club, and every summer and spring holiday we visit mental hospitals and homes for the elderly all over Japan, performing Rakugo, or Japanese comic stories, and other types of entertainment.

In Japan, there are about 350,000 people in mental hospitals, and on average, the length of their stay is longer than 500 days, which is extremely long in comparison with other developed countries.

To be frank, quite a few of these people are, shall we say, "captured" in mental hospitals for unnecessarily long periods. There are several reasons for this:

One major reason was the Japanese legal system. There was a notorious law which ignored the human rights of the mentally handicapped by giving their families the sole right to hospitalize or not to hospitalize them, and the staff of hospitals the sole right to treat them. The patients had no legal means to claim their rights to leave a hospital, even if they were treated like slaves or worse.

Most of Japanese hospitals are private, and some of them would try to increase their revenue by binding the patients onto beds and doing little for them. Patients are sometimes referred to as "fixed assets."

Fortunately, this situation is improving since the law was, at last, revised in July 1987.

But there is another reason, a big problem which has yet to be resolved. It is neither a law, the doctors, nor the patients. It concerns us. It is our attitude, our prejudice.

Many patients find it difficult to go back to their homes because their families do not welcome them. In addition to being worried about their neighbors' reactions, the families themselves tend to think that the patients are not living in the same world. Rejected by their families, ex-patients try to live on their own, but in many instances they are also rejected by society, and most of them have to go back to the hospitals again.

The director of a hospital we visited told us that though he was trying to have as many companies as possible employ his cured patients or those well enough to leave the hospital, there was little response. Even if a company accepts an ex-patient, if he makes even the slightest mistake at work, the company tries to release him.

Aren't we deserting them? If there is somebody who behaves in a slightly funny way in society, do you put him in a hospital and say, "That's it. That will solve the problem. We've cleaned society?"

But that's not right. That's not fair. They have to be cured, they have to be allowed to come back to society. Mental hospitals are not refuges where people evacuate from the real world, and they certainly aren't concentration camps. Like other kinds of hospitals, they exist so that their patients can be cured and return to society; not to retain patients and separate them from the ordinary world.

As is true of other kinds of illness, mental illness can often be found among ourselves. For those of you who have never thought about such things, I shall give you a little information. According to a survey made by an institution in 1984, one out of ten Japanese office workers was suffering from some kind of mental illness, and one out of thirty was undergoing treatment. You might be that one. I might be that one. They are as unlucky as the person who breaks his leg falling down a staircase.

Furthermore, the breadth of mental illness is just as wide as that of physical illness. Some mental illnesses are the equivalent of a simple cold, such as alcoholism and depressive psychosis, whereas others are as serious as cancer.

Would you quarantine somebody because he had a cold ?

For patients attempting to return to society, mental hospitals are not effective places for teaching them how to get along in this

industrialized and hectic society. It is far better if these patients maintain contact with ordinary life with us.

If you know someone who has been in a mental hospital, do not simply avoid him. The fact that he is out means that he is cured and is trying to make it back. The way you treat such a person may make all the difference in the world in whether he will successfully return to society. So treat him as you would anyone else. Avoiding him will only force him back to a mental hospital.

Don't make pariahs out of these people!

Well, as far as I am concerned, to comfort and encourage patients, and just possibly to improve my Rakugo story telling, as well as enjoying a little sightseeing, I would be very happy to continue visiting mental hospitals all over Japan. Yes, I am looking forward to our next visit to the Kinki district this coming February.