

Medical interpreters in short supply as demand rises Yuko Iida / Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

Medical interpreters help foreigners who are not fluent in Japanese communicate with doctors at medical institutions. The demand for such interpreters is rising along with an increase in the number of foreign residents, but their number is not increasing much. A Brazilian woman recently visited Yamada Obstetrics & Gynecology Clinic in Nishio, Aichi Prefecture, for a uterine cancer examination. The woman spoke in Portuguese, and the doctor at the clinic spoke in Japanese. The conversation was interpreted by medical interpreter Margarete Wakako Suzuki, 47.

The doctor asked, "Is there anything else you're concerned about?" The woman replied: "I'm 34 years old now and I don't have any experience of giving birth, but I think I want to have a baby next year. Should I take any exam in advance?" "At this moment, you don't need to take any particular exam," the doctor said. The woman nodded and looked relieved. Suzuki is a third-generation Brazilian of Japanese descent. She was raised in Brazil and speaks fluent Japanese and Spanish in addition to Portuguese. Many young foreigners, mostly Japanese Brazilians, live in and around the city and work in the manufacturing industry, particularly for auto parts makers. When Suzuki started working as a medical interpreter at the clinic 16 years ago, only a few foreigners a year came to the clinic to give birth. As the clinic became known for providing medical interpretation, foreigners began to come from outside the prefecture. Last year, about 150 foreigners gave birth at the clinic. Currently, four medical interpreters are stationed at the clinic and provide interpretation in English and Vietnamese as well.

Celeste Kaoru Hara, 27, who is from Brazil and gave birth to a boy late last month at the clinic, said: "It was my first time to give birth, and there was so much I didn't know. But Ms. Suzuki was with us at the delivery and explained what was going on in Portuguese, like, 'I'm beginning to see the baby's head, so hang on just a little more.' So I could get through it without panicking." The language barrier can lead to misdiagnoses and medical errors, while smooth examination with the help of medical interpreters can lessen the doctors' burden. As more than 2.2 million foreigners were living in Japan as of the end of 2008, the need for medical interpreters is ever increasing. In response to the call for medical interpreters, the Yokohama-based nonprofit organization Multilanguage Information Center Kanagawa is offering a service in cooperation with the Kanagawa prefectural government and others to dispatch medical interpreters. Interpretation is available in 10 languages.

Some other local governments, including the Kyoto city government and private organizations also manage medical interpreters for medical institutions. Some hospitals hire medical interpreters as staff members or bring them in as volunteers, but they are still hard to find. There is no system to publicly certify medical interpreters, and private organizations and others train them in their own ways. Suzuki says medical interpreters need more support.

"They're required to have a wide range of knowledge, including technical terms, medical ethics and each country's culture, but building up such knowledge is mostly left up to [each interpreter's] effort," she says. "When something that is difficult to handle alone--for example when asked by a patient for financial advice--happens, quite a few of them worry without sharing the trouble with others because the people around them tend to have a poor understanding of the situation." In February, medical practitioners and members of private organizations launched the Japan Association of Medical Interpreters, the first national organization for the profession. Yasuhide Nakamura, an Osaka University professor and expert on international health sciences who serves as the association's chairman, said: "Medical interpreters are required to have a high degree of professionalism and bear responsibility involving human life. We should guarantee the pay and the status and develop professionals."

For more information on Multilanguage Information Center Kanagawa, visit mickanagawa.web.fc2.com or call (045) 314-3368. For more information on the Japan Association of Medical Interpreters, visit www.jami.hus.osaka-u.ac.jp The nonprofit organization AMDA International Medical Information Center provides medical interpretation in seven languages at the Tokyo office (03-5285-8088) and four languages at the Kansai office (06-4395-0555). They also advise callers on where to find medical institutions that provide assistance in foreign language.

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