

TOKYO Japan puts the rights of the disabled into the spotlight

Until a few years ago, it was hard to believe that Japan had a disabled population of almost 6 million people. Even in the human mass that is Tokyo, you could go months without seeing a wheelchair because most users were kept indoors by a combination of social prejudice, personal shame, and lack of public facilities.

Today, however, determined lobbying and individual grit have pushed members of this formerly invisible population to prominence in government and the media. And as Japan prepares for a future in which 25% of the population will be over 65, the needs of the disabled are moving to the centre of political debate.

The latest sign of the sea-change in attitudes came earlier this week, when the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) announced that it will draw up legislation to create a barrier-free society. The proposed bill, which is expected to be submitted to parliament by late spring, will include tax incentives for private companies to improve wheelchair access, as well as public education campaigns to improve awareness of the problems faced by the elderly and disabled.

Separate legislation, now being prepared by the Transport Ministry, will oblige rail and bus companies to ensure that new stations and terminals are fitted with elevators, braille signs, and textured flooring to guide the visually impaired. This is not the only development: last summer, parliament passed a revision to employment laws that set a 1.8% minimum quota for the recruitment of disabled workers by private companies.

These moves represent a major breakthrough in Japan, where, until recently, the pressure to conform to the norm meant that many families

were so embarrassed by their disabled relatives that they rarely let them out of the house. Such attitudes are changing thanks to a handful of driven individuals.

At the head of the campaign is Yashiro Eita, a shrewd parliamentary operator who became the first

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disabled member of a Japanese cabinet last October when he was made the Posts and Telecommunications Minister. An entertainer by profession, Yashiro lost the use of his legs in the 1960s after falling off a stage, and was told that he could not appear on television because his disability would upset the viewers.

Since entering parliament 22 years ago, however, he has forced through a number of changes to ensure fair treatment for the disabled, including a campaign for wheelchair-bound criminals to be imprisoned—rather than released because of a lack of ramps and other necessary facilities in jails. This unusual approach has helped Eita convince the LDP that the interests of the disabled are not those of a minority, but of mainstream society. As a friend of Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, he has also been well placed to promote the politically canny view that the creation of a barrier-free society will mean more business for the construction sector, which is the main source of funds for the LDP.

Supporters of the disabled were also given a bigger voice in government when the ruling coalition was

expanded last autumn to include the Komei party, an organisation with lay-buddhist roots that claims to champion welfare policies. It has pushed for extra funds to promote a barrier-free society—an appeal that could not have been better timed. The government is desperately trying to spend its way out of recession, and with an election due by October, it has been more than happy to make funds available in the record 85 trillion yen budget (US\$802 billion) to improve the lives of millions of disabled voters.

Public opinion has also swung towards greater acceptance of the disabled. The clearest evidence is the success of limbless author and journalist Hirotada Ootake, who was undoubtedly the media sensation of last year. His autobiography, *No One's Perfect* sold more than 4 million copies in 1999. In marked contrast with the past seclusion of many wheelchair users, Ootake also took his message out to the public with numerous appearances on prime-time evening news shows.

Such developments suggest that Japan, which has the fastest ageing population in the world, is readying itself for a future in which more and more people will be using wheelchairs or require nursing. “10 years ago, the government focused on roads, bridges, and other infrastructure, but as our society ages, we will have different needs, especially in the area of health care”, said Yashiro. “We have to create an environment in which disabled people don't just sleep indoors all day, but they are given the opportunity to go out and have fun.”

Jonathan Watts

DUBLIN Irish express concern over highest rate of drug-related deaths in EU

Several recent studies on so-called recreational drug use are causing concern in Ireland. According to figures from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) in Lisbon, Ireland has the highest rate of drug-related deaths in the European Union (EU); domestic surveys indicate the average age for Dublin pupils to start experimenting with cannabis is now as young as 12 years.

The European agency found that although the number of drug-

related deaths in member states has stabilised and even fallen in many countries, the statistics show a different story in Ireland.

The report stresses, however, that the recent upsurge in Ireland may be partly due to under-reporting in previous years, and that a comparison of national statistics may be flawed because of the different methods used to record data.

Cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug in the EU, and abuse among 15- and 16-year-olds ranges from 5% in Portugal and Finland to

40% in Ireland and the UK.

A study of 1000 secondary school students in Dublin found that girls in mixed-sex schools were more likely to smoke cannabis than those in single-sex schools. A random study of 2000 students in the Eastern Health Board area found 85% had tried at least one drug, including alcohol and cigarettes; almost 18% admitted they had used “hard” drugs at some time, and 20% had abused cannabis.

Karen Birchard