Services and Housing for the Elderly in Japan ⑦

As of October 1, 2024, Japan's total population stood at 123.8 million.

In celebration of Respect for the Aged Day on September 15, 2025, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications released Japan's population forecast on the 14th. According to the estimates, the number of people aged 65 and over was 36.19 million, accounting for 29.4% of the total population, a new record high and the highest among 38 countries.

Japan's population is in long-term decline and will drop below 120 million by 2031. It is expected to continue decreasing, falling below 100 million — specifically to 99.65 million in 2056 — and then down to 87 million in 2070.

As mentioned in the sixth article of this series, the number of care workers increased from the start of the long-term care insurance system in 2000. However, in October 2023, it began to decline for the first time, to approximately 2.126 million (down 29,000 year-on-year).

In other words, the number of staff decreases while the total population decreases, and the aging rate and demand for nursing care services increase.

According to the number of nursing care workers required by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, announced in July 2024, approximately 2.4 million workers are expected in fiscal 2026 and approximately 2.72 million in fiscal 2040. These figures are difficult to achieve (based on the projected volume of nursing care services in the 9th Nursing Care Insurance Business Plan).

Staffing standards are set for nursing care facilities in Japan. Under the Long-Term Care Insurance Act, nursing care facilities are required to have a certain number of staff members in proportion to their resident capacity. This system determines the number and deployment of staff necessary to provide appropriate nursing care services.

For example, private nursing homes (fee-based homes) for the elderly are required to have one caregiver or nurse for every three residents.

This 3:1 ratio is also applied to special nursing homes for the elderly, with appropriate staffing assignments based on the residents' condition (in principle, full-time staff; caregivers are full-time equivalents, and nurses should be the required number of full-time equivalents, but at least one full-time nurse is required).

Group homes must have at least one caregiver for each unit of 5 to 9 people.

However, due to a severe shortage of care workers and soaring labor costs, maintaining the current strict staffing standard is becoming increasingly complex.

To address these issues, the discussion of deregulating staffing standards from the 3:1

ratio to the 4:1 ratio has been ongoing.

The revision of remuneration for providing long-term care in fiscal year 2024 also introduced a system that partially relaxes staffing standards in specified facilities that utilize ICT and nursing care robots to improve productivity.

Even if we say *introducing ICT and nursing care robots into long-term care fields*, it is not that easy.

The term *Digital Transformation*, or DX, is everywhere these days. Many nursing care facilities have introduced nursing care robots, sensor devices, information sharing, and recording systems. Nevertheless, the problem is the difficulty of implementing them.

Due to differences in facility environments, performance often falls short of its full potential. For example, we sometimes hear that equipment considered adequate when used well in one facility can lead to increased efficiency, but in another facility, it may not be as effective.

The key is human resource development.

It cannot be denied that the nursing care industry often lags behind other sectors. However, in March 2019, a research institute under Social Welfare Corporation Zenkoukai introduced a certification called Smart Caregiver to improve the quality of long-term care services.

Smart Caregiver was established to cultivate human resources capable of handling nursing care DX in response to the rapidly aging society. It aims to cultivate caregivers who can improve both service quality and productivity in the field of nursing care by implementing efficiency measures, addressing labor shortages, and promoting workstyle reforms.

Overview of *Smart Caregiver*

A *Smart Caregiver* certification aims to nurture caregivers who can not only gain knowledge about nursing care robots but also improve the quality of long-term care and productivity by using cutting-edge technology, including nursing care robots and sensor devices.

By efficiently utilizing nursing care robots, the quality of nursing care services could be improved and nursing care work could be streamlined. This certification will lead the coming era as one of the solutions to issues such as the increasing number of people requiring nursing care or assistance, the shortage of caregivers, and the nation's growing financial burden.

A textbook consists of five chapters. Chapter 1: Overview of *Smart Caregiver*, Chapter 2: Basic Theory of Nursing Care Technology, Chapter 3: Basic Theory of Scientific

Nursing Care, Chapter 4: Practical Theory of Implementing Nursing Care Technology, and Chapter 5: Practical Theory of Scientific Nursing Care.

◇Goals for Caregivers◇

- Understand the sense of mission to serve the future of social welfare in Japan and the need for a sustainable nursing care service delivery model based on such a sense.
- Grasp the living function of those who require nursing care and plan appropriate support for them.
- Develop an efficient operation system and continuously improve it
- Instruct persons concerned, such as users and peers
- Understand the features of nursing care robots

◇Eligible Persons for *Smart Caregiver* Certification◇

- Care facility administrators（Facility head, nursing care manager, nursing care supervisor, unit leader and so on）
- Those who work for nursing care facilities and home-care providers
- Those who develop or sell nursing care technologies and assistive technologies
- Students

■ Features and key points of the fourth edition of the *Smart Caregiver* textbook

This textbook is not just an introduction to the "knowledge" of technology, but a practical, implementation-oriented guide that provides a consistent framework from pre-implementation design to education, operation, and evaluation.

From a practical perspective, the book was organized into themes directly related to bottlenecks in the nursing care field, such as the use of generative AI, interpreting LIFE feedback and applying it to improvements, the routine operation of care plan data integration, and basic network and security design. It contains plenty of checklists, templates, and KPI examples that are helpful for meetings. It is designed to directly contribute to productivity improvement efforts, such as standardizing work, reducing wasted time, and building team consensus.

For the fourth edition, to keep up with the latest nursing care equipment or updates in functions/features of monitoring and communication devices, sleep sensors, recording and information-sharing tools, etc., the selection criteria, precautions for device replacement, and compatibility are reorganized. Moreover, explanations are updated to

reflect the changes in systems and guidelines (long-term care insurance systems, LIFE operations, personal information protection, security, etc.). Operational rules that can be confusing in actual work sites are clarified with Q&As and flowcharts.

This book offers examples of weekly, monthly, and quarterly improvement cycles, along with updated case studies and evaluation indicators. This enables readers to efficiently follow the *Plan --> Implement --> Establish --> Verify* process tailored to their work challenges, making it an essential resource for digital core personnel in nursing care fields aiming to demonstrate leadership and achieve results.

This qualification requires the systematic acquisition of a wide range of knowledge and skills, including developing improvement plans for nursing care facilities, understanding the characteristics of ICT equipment, nursing care robots and their practical applications, and improving the ability to instruct and train field staff. More than 10,000 people have already taken the *Smart Caregiver* exam, making it one of the professional qualifications expected to grow in popularity.

References

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renovation for a client who required care services. Before reaching her current position, she had worked as a marketing consultant at a consulting company specializing in the senior market. She holds a Master of Arts in Gelotology from J.F. Oberlin University.