

Increasing Public Participation for Better Healthcare System Reform

Policy Recommendations for those that do and do not go to the hospital, and everyone who supports the delivery of safe medical care

Executive Summary

Health and Global Policy Institute Rebalancing Innovation and Sustainability Project
May 2021

Background of the issue

The social security system is foundational to society's ability to provide the public with stable, secure lives and opportunities to seek happiness. Within that system, the healthcare system in particular plays a central role as social infrastructure that provides ready and affordable access to the highest standards of medical care in the world to all residents of Japan, including members of vulnerable social groups. However, the development of the healthcare system is premised on the assumption of continuous economic growth and expansion, and this premise is likely false. The working-age population, which funds the healthcare system, is shrinking due to accelerating population aging and a declining birthrate. Furthermore, as society ages and the working-age population continues to shrink, it is expected that the cost of healthcare will continue to grow. These changes in society threaten the sustainability of the healthcare system.

Current situation and issues

1. There are insufficient financial resources to maintain the healthcare system's function of providing everyone with the healthcare they need, when they need it. The current costs of care cannot be covered by the current working population alone. To cover that shortfall, the national debt is growing. In other words, the cost of healthcare is being shifted onto future generations who do not yet have a say in system policy.
2. Existing channels and platforms for gathering opinions from members of the public are not operating effectively. Conversely, the popularity of social networks to express policy opinions is growing.
3. There is a possibility that the democratic decision-making process is not functioning properly. For instance, a situation seems to have emerged in which it is politically difficult to raise funds for the healthcare system through higher taxes, but increases in insurance payment levels can be realized quietly, without much input from the public. This suggests problems in the transparency and structure of the policymaking process.

Solution approaches

1. All parties involved in healthcare policy, including politicians, Government institutions, academia, the media, healthcare providers, and insurers, should continuously communicate, in a clear and simple manner, information regarding topics like the current structure of the Japanese healthcare system, the difficulty of sustaining it, and policies for solving issues related to financing. This could help more people obtain the fundamental knowledge and understanding needed to participate in public discussions and decision-making.
2. Create further platforms and opportunities for the public and policymakers to communicate. These platforms should give the public and opportunity to submit opinions on policy and foster the sense that the views of the public are actually reaching decisionmakers.
3. Which policy debates and decisions are acceptable to the public is determined by what options are presented to the public. In order to realize policy decisions that work to balance healthcare payments and benefits in such a way that is manageable for the current working population and put a stop to the trend of passing costs to future generations, it is important to increase the transparency of policymaking and help the public develop a sense of the risks and benefits of various policy options at both a micro and macro level.

Recommendations

1. **Increase opportunities to tell the public about the current circumstances facing Japan's healthcare system, its strengths, and its areas of improvement in a clear, straightforward manner.**
2. **Listen to the public.**
3. **Increase opportunities to communicate with the public about the current circumstances facing Japan's healthcare system in a clear, straightforward manner.**

For detailed information concerning the background to this proposal, the current situation and issues, and specific courses of action we recommend each stakeholder to take, please see the full proposal text.

These recommendations were informed by "Healthcare System Reform and the Value of Healthcare: Public Opinion Research on the Views of Citizens and Patients," a research project conducted by HGPI.