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Don't blindly trust doctors

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"So, are you ready for an operation?" my doctor suddenly asked me.

I was lying on a small bed surrounded by my doctor and three nurses with gloves, scalpels and needles.

I jumped up in shock. I had gone to see him about a tumour on my back. It was hurting me, but I had not expected that it would require surgical removal.

"What are you talking about?" I screamed at him. "Am I in danger? Is it a malignant tumour?"

"No, it isn't malignant. Don't worry," he assured me.

"What do you mean, 'Don't worry?'" I pressed him. "Why do you have to remove it? Can't you give me medication? Is there any alternative treatment?"

I had heard about a medicine called Medline but I didn't ask the doctor because I knew it would not make any difference. I could also see that my questions were beginning to upset him. I had known this doctor only for a month or so, and this was the first time I had seen anyone about my tumour.

I hoped he knew what he was doing, and I kept my fingers crossed, praying to Buddha, my ancestors or whoever to watch over me as I underwent the unknown and unexplained procedure.

A lot of my unease comes from the nature of the doctor-patient relationship in Japan. Let me back up a bit here and explain why I was worried. In 1961, Japan established the basic form of a democratic and egalitarian health care system with universal coverage, access to any health care facility of the patient's choice and low premiums.

According to the World Health Report 2000, the Japanese health care system was rated one of the most efficient among members of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Indeed, the Japanese health care system is one reason why Japanese currently enjoy the longest life span in the world.

However, patient satisfaction is quite another matter.

Japanese people suffer from what is called the "three hour waiting, three minute medicine" practice in hospitals. When patients visit a big hospital, they have to wait for at least three hours, and when they finally meet a doctor, the average consultation time is only three minutes. Under these conditions, it is difficult for doctors to explain to their patients the diagnoses, treatment, alternative options, recommended prescriptions or other relevant information.



The medical system in Japan is quite paternalistic. Because highly scientific knowledge underlies medical treatment, there is a tremendous information and knowledge gap between doctors and patients.

Consequently, a doctor's judgment is the most important factor in deciding what kind of treatment a patient should have. Patients seldom participate in health care decisions. They know little about their rights and submit themselves completely to their doctor's care.

Unfortunately, advanced science has become a means to maintain the hierarchical relationship between physicians and patients.

Doctors sometimes take advantage of this paternalistic relationship for their own research interest. For example, a team of doctors at Yokohama City University recently examined the genes of their patients suffering from colon cancer without the patients' consent. This is said to be a common practice among doctors.

Recently, though, more people are becoming aware of this violation of privacy and are demanding a patient's bill of rights. They are seeking to secure a right to informed consent before treatment. With such a short consultation time available to patients and without the right of informed consent, patients have long been frustrated in Japan.

It is time for Japanese health care professionals to pay a little more attention to their patients' wishes. Doctors can start by doing away with their paternalistic attitude toward patients and regard them as equal partners in the treatment process.

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