

## 9. Malaysia's Report

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The Asian Young Dietitian Network (AYDN) held its inaugural kick-off meeting in Japan from 28/11/23 to 3/12/2023, bringing together dietitians from diverse Asian countries in Tokyo. This significant initiative, generously sponsored by Ajinomoto Co., Inc., aimed to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange among dietitians across the region. As part of the program, participants had the opportunity to visit various institutions, including the Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital, Jumonji University, Funabori Primary School for School Lunch, and the kick-off meeting at Ajinomoto Co., Inc. head quarter (HQ).

### Visit to Japanese Hospital (Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital) (29/11/2023)

The visit to Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital left a lasting impression on me. From the outset, the warm reception by the head dietitian set a positive tone. Her friendly and bubbly personality created an inviting atmosphere, complemented by the backdrop of ginkgo trees with leaves turning a vibrant yellow. A group photo beneath these trees marked a symbolic start to our insightful visit.

Upon entering the hospital, the cleanliness and organization were immediately evident. The group was ushered into a meeting room, where a medical doctor and the head dietitian presented on the nutrition support team and its initiatives. Subsequently, a comprehensive tour exposed us to various facets of the hospital, including the dietetics department, food service kitchen (Fig 1), and a hospital ward.

The presentations and tour provided valuable insights into the work of dietitians at Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital. It became evident that dietitians play a crucial role in the multidisciplinary approach to patient care. Every admitted patient undergoes screening and intervention by a dietitian, emphasizing the significance of nutritional support during hospitalization. Notably, dietitian consultations are covered by insurance in Japan, underscoring the recognition and importance of their role.

The integration of technology in food services showcased Japan's innovative practices. From ordering systems to food preparation and quality monitoring, technology-enhanced efficiency, resource management, and ultimately improved patient care. The automatic rice cooking system served as a notable example of creative and effective technology use. The meticulous attention to detail in creating an optimal

dining environment was particularly impressive. The emphasis on proper feeding positions and environmental considerations highlighted a holistic approach to patient nutrition — a facet often overlooked in other settings.

In comparison to my experience in Malaysia, where dietitian consultations are not covered by insurance, the Japanese model stands out as a potential avenue for improvement. Addressing this disparity could enhance accessibility to dietitian services and improve patient outcomes. The successful implementation of technology in various aspects of healthcare, particularly in the nutrition care process and food service ordering system, serves as a model for future endeavors in my home country. Learning from Japan's experience, we can strive for the effective integration of technology to streamline processes and ensure patient safety.

Looking ahead, Malaysia has significant opportunities for advancement over the next 10-15 years. Advocating for insurance coverage of dietitian consultations is crucial to enhancing public health by increasing access to nutritional expertise. Additionally, incorporating technology into our work processes, such as online nutrition care documentation and advanced food service ordering systems, holds promise for enhancing efficiency and patient care. Continued collaboration and knowledge-sharing with Japanese institutions, like Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital, are essential for ongoing learning and improvement. Strengthening relationships within the Asian Young Dietitian Network and fostering ties with institutions like Ajinomoto will be crucial in implementing positive changes in our home countries.



**Fig 1. Photos of AYDN at the Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital**

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### Visit to primary school for school lunch (Funabori Primary School) (1/12/2023)

Our visit to Funabori Primary School coincided with their sports day, and the lively scene of kids running around with parents and teachers cheering set a cheerful tone. Welcomed by the schoolteacher and dietitian, we changed into indoor slippers and went to a bright meeting room that doubled as a dining area. The school's neat, organized, and sunny environment left a strong impression, especially considering its 100-year history.

After a quick briefing, we got a peek into the kitchen through large windows (Fig 2). The kitchen staff, wearing protective gowns, showcased impressive cleanliness. The corridor walls featured educational posters on food and nutrition, serving as handy learning tools (Fig 3). After that, we returned to the meeting room for a presentation by the school dietitian about her role, and routines, and a Q&A session. The visit wrapped up with a chance to enjoy the tasty school lunch.

The visit highlighted the deep importance of the school lunch programme in Japan. It is not just about feeding students but creating a positive relationship

with food and nutrition from a young age. This foundational habit-building contributes to the development of a healthy and productive nation as these practices persist into adulthood. The involvement of students in distributing food to their peers emerged as a valuable opportunity for fostering accountability and independence—essential life skills that echo beyond the school years.

In Malaysia, the absence of a structured school lunch system stands in contrast to the Japanese model. Students have the freedom to purchase food from school canteens based on personal preferences and use their funds. Notably, government schools in Malaysia lack dedicated school dietitians, a role more commonly found in international schools. Considering the Japanese model, there's a case for Malaysia to think about having a school lunch system. Advocating for its importance could create job opportunities for dietitians. Introducing a school lunch system might also help with early nutrition education, addressing the high prevalence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in the country. Funabori Primary School's experience is a valuable reference for imagining a healthier future for Malaysian schoolchildren.



Fig 2-3. AYDN visited the Funabori Elementary School lunch

### Kick-off meeting of AYDN (1/12/2023)

The Kick-off meeting, hosted at the prestigious Ajinomoto HQ, commenced with a warm welcome from Prof Shigeru Yamamoto (Jumonji University) and senior management from Ajinomoto Co., Inc. (Global Communication Department). Subsequently, each participating dietitian from various Asian countries delivered a concise 10-minute presentation, setting the stage for collaborative discussions and insights.

In my presentation, I provided an overview of Malaysia, touching on its capital, Kuala Lumpur, population, and the rich cultural tapestry formed by its diverse races (Fig 4). I delved into Malaysia's food culture, illustrating how it is shaped by the influences of various ethnicities. Two iconic Malaysian dishes, Nasi Lemak and Asam Laksa, were highlighted, along

with staple ingredients in Malaysian cooking. Shifting focus, I addressed nutritional challenges in Malaysia, emphasizing the high prevalence of overweight in both adults and children, as well as the alarming rates of diabetes issues exacerbated by changing eating habits and insufficient exercise (1). I discussed government initiatives like the KOSPEN program (2) and the Malaysian Dietitians' Association's strategies to enhance dietitians' visibility through annual Nutrition Month and Dietitians' Day celebrations. Concluding my presentation, I shared my vision for AYDN, aiming to foster collaboration among Asian countries, enabling the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and funding support for regional nutrition initiatives.

The presentations from fellow dietitians left a lasting impression, showcasing their deep understanding of their own country's food culture,

nutritional challenges, and visionary approaches for improvement. The passion for dietetics resonated in each presentation. A common thread emerged—the shared challenges faced by our countries, such as the rising prevalence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), the double burden of childhood malnutrition, and the potential for enhancing the role of dietitians. This collective insight highlighted the abundant opportunities for collaboration to address these shared concerns.

My expectation from AYDN is to strengthen the bonds and friendships established through various activities and initiatives. Proposed initiatives include small-scale research projects, such as dietitian surveys, to understand the challenges faced by young dietitians in our respective countries. With this data, AYDN can strategically plan activities to support the growth and success of young dietitians. Additionally, envisioned activities include webinars, monthly virtual meetings, and annual physical meetings, providing diverse platforms for ongoing collaboration and learning.

In conclusion, the Kick-off Meeting of the Asian Young Dietitian Network (AYDN) has successfully ignited collaboration and knowledge exchange among dietitians across Asia. From insightful visits to institutions in Japan to presentations highlighting common challenges, the meeting emphasized shared dedication to addressing health issues. AYDN's commitment to ongoing collaboration, research projects, and supportive initiatives for young dietitians bodes well for the network's role in advancing nutrition and healthcare throughout Asia. The meeting stands as a pivotal moment, laying the groundwork for a healthier, more connected future.

#### REFERENCES

1. Institute For Public Health, Ministry of Health Malaysia. National health and morbidity survey. 2019.
2. Institute For Public Health, Ministry of Health Malaysia. KOSPEN PLUS. 2021.



**Fig 4. Presentation at the AYDN Kick-off meeting**