

## 14. Vietnam's Report

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Vietnam is one of Asia's fastest-developing countries, and with it comes an industrialized food culture and several nutrition challenges. The Vietnamese dietetics system, on the other hand, is still in its early stages, with the first bachelor course in nutrition only recently celebrating its 10th anniversary. There has been a shortage of human resources in several nutrition disciplines; as of 2023, Vietnam has just 785 dietitians across the country. When compared to other Asian nations, Vietnam's dietetics still faces multiple problems, such as underdeveloped legal frameworks, a lack of expertise in hospital systems, and school nutrition. As a result, as some of Vietnam's first dietitians, we are overjoyed to be a part of the Asian Young Dietitian Network (AYDN). We believe that by joining this network, we will be able to learn a lot from our colleagues from similar cultures and share our shared concerns, allowing us all to grow as dietitians. We have already received a lot of valuable lessons and information from the members and professors in Japan after joining the kick-off meeting program from November 28th to December 1st, 2023, in Tokyo, Japan. We would like to share some of our experiences and opinions from the kick-off meeting program in this report.

### Visit to Japanese Hospital (Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital)

We were welcomed by friendly and generous Japanese registered dietitians (RD). From the meeting and lectures of the hospital's head of the nutrition department, Ms. Keiko Hirose, RD, and Dr. Matsumoto, we were impressed with how well-organized the management is, the flow of the nutrition care plan is a corporation of nurses, and attending doctors to the RD. Their attention to minute details is worth admiration, from the RD's dedication to making 80 menus with various adjustments to the texture according to the Japanese IDDSI classification to the instructions on how to assist patients in taking their meals. Moreover, we came to understand the importance of the RD to the finances of the hospital, as they can bring a lot of profit by providing nutrition counseling. In Vietnam, most hospitals offer free nutrition counseling, however in Japan, the first 30-minute appointment costs around \$20

USD and the second session costs about \$15 USD, with health insurance covering 70% of the cost.

The most remarkable aspect to us was the range of textures on the menu while still ensuring that the food looked appetizing; in Vietnam, the IDDSI categorization is poorly implemented, and even if it is, the dishes are quite monotonous or not up to grade. Meanwhile, in Nerima Hikarigaoka Hospital, the staple food (rice) alone has many variations from normal rice, soft rice, and porridge (whole porridge, 50% porridge...) to thickening porridge, liquidized, and jelly type. Furthermore, the texture-modified dishes are shaped to look like normal dishes so the patients can find them appealing. We hope that we can acquire more knowledge on these texture-modified dishes not only from Japan but also from our fellows in the network and apply it to Vietnamese hospitals in the near future so that Vietnamese patients with dysphagia or chewing problems can also enjoy scrumptious meals other than the options of ONS or enteral feeding/parental feeding.



**Fig 1. Japanese hospital meal – soft diet**

### Visit to elementary school for school lunch (Funabori Elementary School)

One of the very meaningful activities that we participated in was visiting and observing the school lunch meal at Funabori Elementary School. Unlike many other countries, Japan has a remarkable system where over 30,000 dietitians are dedicated to ensuring the nutritional quality and safety of school meals for children. This demonstrates the high regard that the Japanese government and society have for children's nutrition. In addition, one extremely impressive thing is

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that lunch is completely free for the children at this school.

During the visit, I also had the opportunity to observe the kitchen staff through a system of glass windows. The kitchen design is equipped with glass windows so students can observe the process of cooking staff preparing their meals. The dietitian here said it is also a way to educate children about nutrition, teaching them gratitude to those who make their meals.

Japanese school dietitians are in charge of planning menus (about 290 menus for a school year), calculating costs, ordering food, managing food hygiene, and corresponding with food allergies, nutrition education,...I was deeply moved when the principal said that thanks to the dietitian students can have delicious and safe school meals and praised the dietitian at this elementary school as the best in Japan. This shows the high regard for the role and status of school dietitians in Japan.

There are many other useful things that I and other young dietitians learned during the visit to Funabori Elementary School. I hope that the Japanese school lunch system and school dietitian job positions will soon spread to other Asian countries and around the world.

#### **Kick-off meeting of AYDN**

At the kick-off meeting, we had a chance to present about the food culture, the nutritional problem, and the dietetic system of our country. Vietnamese food culture is rich and diverse, with a unique blend of flavors, a renowned street food culture, and regional varieties. Our main ingredients are rice and rice products, meat, poultry, freshwater fish, and vegetables and the main seasonings are fish sauces, Fish/shrimp/crab paste, and natural spices. When it comes to traditional Vietnamese food, it is impossible not to mention pho and banh mi - two dishes that have gained international popularity and have become iconic representations of Vietnamese cuisine. In terms of nutritional problems, Vietnam faces challenges such as childhood overweight and obesity, child malnutrition, elderly malnutrition, and metabolic syndrome. Childhood overweight and obesity have seen a rapid increase, from 8.5% and 2.5% in 2010 to 19% and 8.1% in 2020 for overweight and obesity in children 5-19 years old, respectively. High consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages/snacks, fast food, and low levels of physical activity have been identified as contributing

factors to this issue. However, specific policies or programs targeting overweight and obesity have yet to be implemented. Regarding the dietetic system in Vietnam, there are two pathways to becoming a dietitian. One can complete a 4-year Bachelor of Nutrition course at a university. Alternatively, one can pursue a 6-year general doctor program followed by a nutrition residency. Dietitians in Vietnam can work in various settings such as hospitals, institutes/universities, and companies but not as school dietitians or in their clinics. While there are legal protections for dietitians in place, the strength of these protections is not considered sufficient.

During the meeting, we also had the opportunity to learn about the status of the other 11 Asian countries. The presentations from the member countries highlighted the incredible diversity and tantalizing nature of Asian food culture. However, it may be necessary for us to reevaluate our dietary patterns due to the prevalent issue of overweight and obesity across the countries. While some nations have implemented national intervention programs, no country has achieved significant success in addressing this problem. In terms of the dietetic system, most countries have their training systems and protective laws for dietitians. Notably, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines have specific dietitian laws that focus on dietitians, rather than being merely a section of broader health laws. Conversely, Bangladesh currently lacks a dedicated law for nutrition. In terms of working opportunities for dietitians, many places are available however, for schools, Japan stands out as they have dietitians in all schools, while other countries may only have them in private schools or not at all.

Overall, participating in the AYDN provides an opportunity for countries like Vietnam and others to work together to enhance the status of dietitians. We expect that by fostering strong friendships and relationships among participating countries, we can create opportunities to share knowledge through collaborative research, webinars, and workshops. Through these interactions, we can collectively propose programs and initiatives aimed at addressing and improving the nutritional problems specific to each country. The ultimate goal is to work together towards a healthier future for all.