

(Philippines) Report of the Young Asian Dietitian Network's Meeting in Aomori, Japan

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1: Introduction

Selected AYDN members were given the unique opportunity to observe how nutrition is implemented across the lifespan, from childhood to the elderly, during their visit to Aomori, Japan. We were fortunate to experience Japan through the lens of nutrition and health. The selected AYDN members, who are practitioners in their respective home countries (Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bhutan, and Bangladesh), not only gained valuable insights but also contributed to the ongoing manuscript that the organization is developing.

2: Visit to the Aomori Elementary School Lunch Center & Sannai Nishi Elementary School

I have always been fascinated by Japan's school lunch program, as seen in the videos I watched online. Seeing it in person, however, was even more incredible. "Amazed" is truly an understatement when it comes to appreciating this program for the children of Japan. It not only nourishes their bodies with healthy, locally sourced ingredients but also instills lifelong habits of healthy eating and appreciation for local produce. It is no wonder that Japan is known for its population reaching 100 years or more.

I can only hope for a similar program to be implemented in the Philippines. While we do have feeding programs for malnourished children, they often lack sustainability and fail to ensure the development of consistent healthy eating habits. Clearly, we have a long way to go.

I was particularly impressed by the strict adherence to HACCP standards, which ensured food safety and sanitation, as well as the nutritional content and balance of meals. Additionally, I appreciated the organized and timely operations within the facility. As an educator handling food service subjects, I was amazed to see these standards not only followed but rigorously enforced. For example, in the preparation area for vegetables, there are separate washing bins, and a worker is assigned exclusively to each bin to prevent cross-contamination. The Japanese take food safety and sanitation so seriously that even minor lapses — which might be overlooked in other cultures — are unacceptable. Every step in the food preparation and serving process is monitored and adhered to by the 100 staff members responsible for serving **at least 11,000 meals across 34 schools in Aomori**. This facility is just one of several preparing lunch meals for the region. There are also five dietitians who monitor operations and those with specific needs, such as children with food allergies. During our visit, there were 12 children with allergies, and their meals were prepared and stored separately to prevent contamination.

Beyond meal preparation, nutrition education is provided to stakeholders to ensure not only safe and delicious meals but also a greater understanding and appreciation of local foods and nutrition. We are truly grateful to have had the opportunity to experience something not accessible to many. We hope that at least a similar program can be implemented in the Philippines.

The experience was made even more enriching as we not only toured the facility and attended lectures but also had the opportunity to taste the meals served to the students, providing us with a comprehensive understanding of the program. Despite focusing on **lowering sodium, increasing calcium, and reducing fat**, the meals were surprisingly delicious and very filling. During the discussion, the dietitian provided a comprehensive overview of the program — from legal mandates, processes, implementation, and service, to nutrition programs involving all stakeholders to ensure health and nutrition.

It was also remarkable to see how the center manages waste efficiently, processing leftovers into fertilizer. The dedication to quality, safety, nutrition, and sustainability makes Japan's school lunch program a model that we can only aspire to replicate in the Philippines.

After observing the food production, we were happy to see how much the students appreciated their meals. The students themselves are responsible for serving the food and maintaining cleanliness after meals. We were warmly received by the school principal, the students, and the teachers. I also appreciated that the students finished their meals, and some even went for a second serving. Teachers join the students while having the same meal, creating a sense of shared experience. I was also fascinated to see dietitians going from room to room, discussing the nutritional content, ingredients, and origin of each meal. This further reinforces the appreciation for local food and its health benefits. This is one of my favorite sites visited, as the students are actively engaged, demonstrating that Japanese children are happy, well-nourished, and aware of the value of their food.

3: Visit to the Wakoen nursing home

Nursing homes are not as common in the Philippines, so I was grateful for the opportunity to visit and observe one in Japan. The facility's location offers a stunning view, and each patient's room is beautifully designed to showcase the wonders of nature.

True to the facility's objective, the role of the dietitians goes beyond simply providing nourishment — their goal is to ensure that patients enjoy their meals, even in the final stages of life. While this may seem somber, witnessing patients pass peacefully after a fulfilling meal conveys a sense of dignity and comfort. I truly admire the staff for their dedication to caring for the elderly.

It was also a valuable experience to try the food served to the patients, as it allowed us to gain a better understanding of their daily experiences. While the meals may not always be visually elaborate, the food is fresh and flavorful. Unlike many nursing homes in the Philippines, where dietitians are directly involved in meal preparation, this facility receives food from a commissary kitchen, with kitchen staff responsible for plating and serving the meals. One key observation I made was how the dietitians carefully monitored each patient, ensuring they consumed their meals and met their recommended intake. I also noted that the calorie allocation for patients is around 1,000 kcal, which is relatively lower compared to the elderly meal standards in the Philippines.

4: Visit to the Hiranai Central hospital

As a clinical dietitian for 10 years and now a teacher, it was enlightening to observe how dietitians work in a hospital in Japan. I noticed several similarities between the practices in the Philippines and those in my own country, from the rounds and counseling provided to patients to the way patient trays are served. One key

difference, however, is that the Hiranai Central Hospital mainly serves geriatric patients, reflecting the elderly population in Aomori and Japan. In comparison, patient cases in the Philippines tend to be more acute or complex. I also observed that the meals and formula/ tube feeding provided in Japan are lower in calories, often starting at around 1,000 kcal, whereas in the Philippines, we typically provide 1,500–1,800 kcal for the geriatric group. Another notable difference is the format of the nutrition care plan. In Japan, dietitians still use the SOAP format, while in the Philippines, we have been mandated since 2019 to use the NCP ADIME format.

Observing the work of Japanese dietitians brought me back to my early years as a clinical dietitian, reminding me of the core principles and dedication required in patient-centered nutrition care. It was both a nostalgic and educational experience, highlighting both similarities and differences in practice across countries

5: Aomori university of Health and Welfare Campus tour

During the tour of the laboratories, I was particularly impressed by the lab equipment and, more importantly, the activities that the students perform. In the biochemistry lab, for instance, students assess the nutritional content of commonly available food items and even compare their findings to the information on the nutrition labels. This is remarkable, as such activities are not part of the curriculum in the Philippines. Typically, our students need to outsource product analysis to external laboratories for similar exercises. I was also impressed by the nutrition education lab, where a machine can quickly and accurately read the nutritional content of food items and provide a rating in stars based on quality. I hope that a similar machine can be developed in the Philippines for use in student learning and nutrition counseling.

Observations from the visit:

- Quality of education is maintained by a tight admission limit of just 30 students per class.
- Students strictly comply with safety standards, wearing full personal protective equipment during lab activities.
- The industry trade kitchen supports food service for the cafeteria, providing a professional training environment.

Overall, the facilities and student activities at Aomori University are impressive and inspiring. It highlights the integration of hands-on practical experience, safety, and quality assurance in the training of future nutrition professionals

What was even more impressive was when I inquired whether the facilities are better in private schools, knowing that Aomori University is a government institution. I was informed that the facilities are essentially the same across all universities offering the program. This is a stark contrast to my experience in the Philippines, where disparities between institutions are very obvious — private schools typically have much better and more upgraded facilities compared to government schools.

This highlights a remarkable commitment in Japan to equitable access to high-quality education and training resources, ensuring that all students, regardless of the type of institution, receive the same level of practical experience and exposure to advanced facilities.

6: AYDN manuscript

One of the key purposes of the trip was to continue the discussions and collaborative work on the research efforts

of the network. I joined the team as they entered the final stages of the manuscript, contributing mostly to the discussions and deeper analysis—going beyond a straightforward comparison of Nutrition and Dietetics curricula across Asia. What I realized is that, while there are clear differences in curriculum structures, drawing direct comparisons is challenging because nutrition itself is highly culture-specific. It cannot be easily generalized, even within ASEAN countries.

I also noted the significant difference in total program units in the Philippines, largely due to the inclusion of general education courses that remain required for graduation. This is particularly important now, as the Philippines is transitioning its tertiary curriculum: college programs may soon be reduced to three years, focusing solely on professional subjects, while general education courses will be fully integrated into senior high school, which only started in 2016. AYDN's research efforts will play a crucial role in guiding the Philippines as the country enters the planning phase for major changes in the tertiary education curriculum.

7: Aomori and Japanese Culture

Visiting Japan had always been a childhood dream of mine, but for many reasons, I kept postponing my first trip. Now, I finally understand why—it was meant to happen at a time when I could truly appreciate it, and it has become one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I have long been fascinated by Japanese culture, but experiencing it firsthand is entirely different. From the clean tap water, you can drink safely, to the meticulous attention to quality in their products, services, and food, from the deep respect people show one another to their discipline and sense of time—everything felt extraordinary. I have travelled to other countries, but Japan made me feel like I was in a completely different world. I may have skipped the usual first-time tourist destinations like Osaka, Tokyo, or Kyoto, but Aomori became incredibly special to me and was absolutely worth being my first city to visit in Japan. What I learned later on is that Aomori is actually the snowiest city in the world—something that adds even more charm to its character and atmosphere.

I am grateful for the chance to experience the Nebuta Festival through its museum; to enjoy apple picking that felt straight out of the fairy-tale books I loved as a child—complete with the sweetest, most delightful apples I have ever tasted. I was amazed by the high-tech Japanese karaoke, the efficiency of the public transportation system, and the unbelievably fresh sushi. We have Japanese restaurants back home, but tasting authentic Japanese cuisine made with the freshest ingredients was unforgettable.

I was also struck by how simplicity and efficiency harmoniously blend in their culture. Professor Yamamoto shared that wealth disparity is not something people focus on in Japan, and that mindset was evident everywhere—from the effortless beauty of the people to their emphasis on functionality over outward appearance. Experiencing all of these reaffirmed why Japan has always fascinated me, and why this journey will remain one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

8: Conclusion

I was given the chance to visit Japan for the very first time through AYDN, and it became one of the most meaningful trips of my life. It wasn't about the flashy, quirky, or overly romanticized Japan we often see in vlogs—this time, I experienced the country through the lens of Nutrition and Health. Years ago, I watched a video about Japan's school lunch program and wished I could witness it myself. This trip turned that wish into reality. We

skipped the usual tourist destinations and focused on what mattered to us. From observing a school lunch center and witnessing how meals are prepared and served in an elementary school, to watching dietitians in action at nursing homes and hospitals, each visit provided me with a deeper appreciation of their approach to nutrition care. Another meaningful part of this trip was the opportunity to discuss and personally work on the ongoing activities and the manuscript being finalized by AYDN. Being able to contribute to these efforts face-to-face added depth to our collaboration and strengthened our shared commitment to advancing the profession across Asia. But beyond the activities, the best part was the people. I gained immense respect for the discipline, humility, and kindness of the Japanese people. I'm also deeply grateful for the friendships formed with colleagues from across Asia—experiencing Japan with them made everything even more memorable. I may not have explored the typical tourist spots, but this trip is truly one for the books—a definite core memory. Not everyone gets this kind of opportunity, and I am genuinely grateful. This experience made me even more passionate about supporting AYDN and contributing to efforts that uplift and strengthen our profession.

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