



# A COUNTRY WITHOUT ALMS

The Japanese make few charitable donations. **David Cyranoski** meets a patient advocate and scientist working to change a cultural reticence about giving.

**M**akoto Ohama has two major goals in life. One is to feed himself, using his own hands — the 62-year-old was paralysed from the neck down in a rugby tackle 30 years ago and knows that this goal would require a leap in regenerative therapy. The second, as president and chief executive of the Japan Spinal Cord Foundation, is to accelerate the research that might one day lead to such treatment, for others if not for himself. But, in Japan, this more modest goal seems equally remote.

Despite being Japan's leading non-profit organization devoted to spinal-cord injury, Ohama's foundation can barely afford to pay for administrative and community-building activities. It has no money for scientists. In Japan, there is a trifling amount of philanthropic money for foundations to draw on. In 2005, the twenty largest grant-giving foundations in Japan spent only one-thirtieth of what their counterparts in the United States did, even though Japan has one-third of the United States' economic might. And most philanthropic funds in Japan are tied to industry, creating potential conflicts of interest. Unlike foundations in the West, where private donations "just pour in", Ohama says that in Japan, "the will to give is weak".

This is particularly bad news for researchers who work in unpopular fields, including those stymied by political debate, such as stem-cell research. Japan's government does fund research at levels comparable to the governments of most other developed countries — 0.67% of gross domestic product, compared with 0.83% by the

United States'. But foundations play a crucial part in filling the holes left by the government and in supporting young researchers, says Hideyuki Yuze, deputy director of the Tokyo-based Japan Foundation Centre. They also fund research on rare diseases in the developing world that pharmaceutical companies may ignore. "They can give long-term support and balance political inconsistencies," says Shin-ichi Nishikawa, a stem-cell expert at the Center for Developmental Biology in Kobe.

Like Ohama, Nishikawa is hoping to boost philanthropic support for science in Japan. But in their quest, the two campaigners will have to take on economic realities, government regulations, tax policies and most intractably, a culture in which individuals, rich or not, do not generally donate.

The richest Americans are high-profile donors. Bill Gates donated some \$11 billion between 1995 and 2005, much of which went to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, Washington. Warren Buffett last year pledged \$43.5 billion — the largest philanthropic gift ever — to several organizations, including the Gates foundation (see [www.nature.com/news/specials/philanthropy/index.html](http://www.nature.com/news/specials/philanthropy/index.html)).

Japan's big givers are notable by their absence. "We just don't have the extraordinarily rich," says Yuze. Japan's richest person, Masayoshi Son, a self-made communications mogul worth \$5.8 billion, does not give to charity, except in times of disaster such as earthquakes. He ranks 129th

on the Forbes 2007 list of billionaires. A spokesperson for Japan's second richest person, real-estate mogul Akira Mori (\$5.7 billion), refused to say whether Mori or the Mori Trust, of which he is president, make charitable donations.

"Rich people are not respected in Japan, so they hide their money," says Yoko Takahashi, director of the Japan Philanthropic Association in Tokyo. "Many of the people who give do so anonymously," she says. "I'd like to see rich people applauded for doing things."

But the lack of charitable giving extends to citizens further down the economic ladder. Fund-raising efforts aimed at the average citizen generally fall flat. It took 3 years of monthly campaigns for Ohama to raise

the ¥3 million (US\$24,000) necessary to establish his non-profit organization in 1997. His foundation now raises an average of ¥21 million per year, but half of that comes from grants and subsidies. His biggest fund-raising event was an Internet campaign that brought in just ¥700,000. Other organizations, such as the Kidney Foundation in Tokyo, do not bother with fund-raising because they lose money on it.

## Big bucks

By contrast, the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis in Florida can bring in millions of dollars from a single fund-raising event, and 85% of its proceeds go to science. In Canada, which has only 40% as many patients with spinal-cord

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— Yoko Takahashi

K. SHIROBAYASHI / GETTY IMAGES

injuries as Japan, the Vancouver-based Rick Hansen Foundation's yearly walking and wheelchair-riding Wheels in Motion campaigns bring in an average of Can\$1.5 million a year — eight times more than Ohama's foundation raises in an average year. Half of that goes to research on spinal-cord injuries.

Japan's economic policies discourage philanthropic activity. A low-interest-rate policy, in effect since Japan's economic bubble burst in the 1990s, has cut into income on endowments, and many foundations have had to make drastic cuts or terminate their grant programmes. "They cannot afford to be adventurous," says Yuze.

And strict regulations mean that very few of the country's 32,000 non-profit organizations are eligible to receive tax-free donations. The Japan Spinal Cord Foundation is not one. "The government doesn't trust non-profits," says Motoyuki Watanabe, the foundation's executive director. The regulations were made to discourage money laundering, but those in the foundation business say that it's time for a change.

Nishikawa was part of the lobbying effort that won a small change in the regulation of non-profit organizations, increasing the number receiving tax-free donations from 32 in 2003 to 71 now. He would like to see further changes that would allow several organizations to band together in their fund-raising and lobbying activities.

But the tax situation is not the only reason the average Japanese person is less likely to give than the average American. Unlike in the United States, the national health-care system and generous overseas development aid in Japan may convince people that the government is taking care of charity both at home and abroad. "People think the government is going to do everything for them, but we can't always rely on the government," says Takahashi.

This belief in collective, rather than individual, action might explain why most Japanese foundations are either created by large companies or

rely on them for their funding. Pharmaceutical giant Takeda has one of the biggest — the Takeda Science Foundation — which gave out ¥1 billion in biomedical research grants in 2005. Other companies, such as Mitsubishi and Toyota, have foundations that give less than half that amount. These companies are also members of the Nippon Keidanren's 1% Club — a 'gentleman's agreement' calling on members to give 1% of their profits to society. (Keidanren is an industry association with 1,600 members, including many of Japan's largest companies.) Surveys by the club show that members who donate tend to give 1.3% of their profits to support some kind of social activity, but this does not generally mean donations to foundations.

### Keeping clean

Most 'independent' foundations with enough money to distribute research grants still rely on industry for most of their support. The Kidney Foundation, for example, gets 90% of its money from drug companies. But this tends to restrict funding to research that has a quick pay-off. "If we had more money from individuals, we could look with a longer view," says Mami Honda, the foundation's director. Foundations tied to industry also sacrifice their independence. "You have a hard time decontaminating yourself," says Robert Goldstein, chief scientific officer at the New York chapter of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. "You lose your clout."

Indeed, in September, the Tokyo-based Japan Heart Foundation was embroiled in a scandal when it was discovered that it had provided ¥200 million for a clinical trial of a beta-blocker for treating heart failure while receiving ¥300 million from the company that made the drug. The health ministry warned the



Makoto Ohama struggles to raise funds for his foundation for spinal-cord research.

foundation that such "fund-raising was inappropriate for a charitable organization". The researcher running the trial also broke ministry policy by combining the foundation money with ¥119 million in grants — funds that are not supposed to be combined with any other grants. The trial was completed in 2006,

but the health ministry pulled its funding for the researcher for the following two years.

Remaining independent is key for an organization such as Ohama's because he wants to lobby the government for more funding for spinal-cord-injury research. He also wants to push for looser restrictions on embryonic stem cells: Japan ostensibly has lax policies on stem-cell research but regulatory hurdles stymie the work. The nation has only three established stem-cell lines, but researchers need separate facilities even to work with these (see *Nature* 438, 263; 2005). They also need to obtain approval every time they change the research plan, or add new people to the team. "There are too many restrictions," says Ohama. "Doctors here can't say that, but as patients we can." But without money his lobbying power is weak.

Nishikawa says that part of the responsibility lies with physicians. "Doctors and researchers do not regard patients as an important group to work with. There's no solidarity with patients," he says. "This should be changed by the doctors." He has given talks at various academic society meetings encouraging scientists to reach out to patient groups. But he faces an uphill battle. Japanese patients are reluctant to come forward with their problems because they fear drawing attention to themselves or their families, especially in the case of genetic disease.

Many Japanese people are just not aware of the issues, says Honda. There are no sports heroes or movie stars willing to use their celebrity to raise awareness in the way that Michael J. Fox did for Parkinson's disease and the Reagan family did for Alzheimer's disease. Honda says that she has asked famous people with kidney problems for help in promoting the foundation's activities, but all have refused.

Nishikawa relates the story of Hisao Niura, the former baseball pitcher for the popular Yomiuri Giants in Tokyo, who initially hid his diabetes. When others noticed a combination of needles and weight loss, rumours started to spread that he was a drug user. "I can't think of any other famous Japanese with disease," says Nishikawa. For now, Ohama's foundation uses Christopher Reeve as its symbol.

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JAPAN SPINAL CORD FOUNDATION

K. KASAHARA/AP



Japan's richest person, Masayoshi Son (left), and America's richest, Melinda and Bill Gates, have different attitudes about donating money to charitable foundations.

J. NGWENYA/REUTERS