



## Original article

# Comparing healthcare systems: considering Japan and Portugal

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This article makes a comparative analysis of the Japanese and Portuguese healthcare systems and draws conclusions as to how the Portuguese system may be reformed taking into account the Japanese experience. In a time of financial turmoil, where it is necessary to assure the maintenance of the National Health Service, it is important to learn with the best international practice: a system that has to handle, for example, with the greatest life expectancy in the world and an aging population. The results of a survey carried out on 400 people (200 Japanese and 200 Portuguese) on the degree of satisfaction with the health care system, costs, patient–doctor relationship and alternative medicine use are analyzed as well.

**Methods:** Comparative analysis, surveys and interviews.

**Results:** The Japanese population has a higher grade of satisfaction of their healthcare system than the Portuguese.

**Conclusions:** The Portuguese healthcare system may use some of the methods of the Japanese healthcare system in order to achieve better outcomes, be more efficient and therefore to better serve the general public.

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### Comparação de sistemas de saúde: considerando o Japão e Portugal

### RESUMO

**Introdução:** Neste estudo procede-se a uma comparação entre os sistemas de saúde japonês e português, no sentido de perceber em que medida o sistema português pode aprender com o sistema japonês. Nesta altura de crise financeira e económica, em que é necessário garantir a sustentabilidade do Sistema Nacional de Saúde, importa aprender com as boas práticas internacionais de um sistema que tem de lidar, por exemplo, com a maior esperança média de vida do mundo e uma população também cada vez mais envelhecida. Também são analisados os resultados de um questionário feito a 400 pessoas (200 de nacionalidade

#### Palavras chave:

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japonesa e 200 de nacionalidade portuguesa) sobre o grau de satisfação com o sistema de saúde, os custos, a relação médico-doente e o uso de medicinas alternativas.

**Métodos:** Análise comparativa, questionários e entrevistas.

**Resultados:** Maior grau de satisfação da população japonesa comparativamente com a população portuguesa.

**Conclusões:** O sistema de saúde português pode utilizar alguns métodos que o sistema de saúde japonês tem utilizado para atingir melhores resultados, ser mais eficiente e, assim, ser capaz de melhor servir a população.

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## Introduction

A person's health is a major factor in determining his or her quality of life. It is always on his or her mind, as is the concern of suddenly becoming ill, which may come about due to unforeseen circumstances or may be the result of something that has always been there, just lingering under the surface.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined "health" as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".<sup>1</sup> Though the right to health has been declared a basic human right across the globe, only citizens in developed countries have come to expect the provision of healthcare services as a certainty. That certainty does not exist across the underdeveloped world.

Those immediately responsible for ensuring patients have access to quality healthcare are the professionals working in the field, such as doctors, nurses and technicians. They are not alone in this task, however, as administrators, managers and governors are also an integral part of the system. Ultimately, developed countries have set up public healthcare systems, whether through regulation of private enterprise, in an attempt to maximize coverage, or through direct provision of healthcare services by a public entity, whose purpose it is to deliver quality healthcare to its citizens.

Due to the ongoing economic and financial crisis in Portugal, the financial sustainability of the National Health Service has been thrown into question and finding a way to solve this issue has become even more urgent than before. The National Health Service, as well as the whole Healthcare sector, needs to be reformed to become more efficient, delivering quality universal healthcare for all at a financially sustainable cost.

In the global world we live in today, it is important to focus not only on one's own country, but to widen one's horizons and try to understand other countries as well. Learning and exchanging ideas with others have always been a trigger for change in History, in both bad and good times.

Countries have different cultures, and culture plays a very important role in determining people's behavior, which has an impact on all aspects of society, from demography to health. Japan has been "westernizing" its culture since the mid-XIX century, a process that has only been strengthened by American influence in the post-World War II (WWII) period. That said, old habits die hard, and many traditional aspects of Japanese culture remain strong even today.

Portugal has always been a part of the Western world and, in particular, Latin and Mediterranean cultures, with important Catholic influences. Urban areas, in particular areas near

the ocean, contrast sharply with rural areas deeper into the Iberian Peninsula in terms of, for example, eating habits. Many traditions lost in urban areas still live on in the countryside.

This article will compare the health care systems of these two countries, Japan and Portugal, in an attempt to learn what sets them apart and brings them together, as a means of contributing to the current debate on how to reform the Portuguese healthcare system.

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## Healthcare in Japan

The current Japanese healthcare system, the "Kaihoken", has been in place for the last 50 years. It has proven quite effective at providing universal healthcare coverage, being its driving force "health insurance for all".<sup>2</sup> Implemented in 1961 after WWII, the kaihoken, together with benefits having become more egalitarian, keeps health expenditures relatively low (8.5% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)). Furthermore, it managed that Japan's healthcare system nowadays ranks 20th in terms of expenditure among the countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2008. The percentage of the population aged 65 years or older has increased nearly four-fold (it raised from 6% to 23%) over the past 50 years.

It all started with the inauguration of Emperor Meiji in 1868 when the Japanese Government decided to strive on a policy to promptly westernize Japanese society. Regarding healthcare, the government successfully changed the basis of medical practice from Chinese to western medicine.<sup>3</sup> Japan's universal medical care insurance system adopted the German social health insurance model in which both employers and employees manage the insurance plans.<sup>4</sup> Citizens have to pay monthly insurance premiums under the social insurance system. It includes two types of public insurance schemes: *National Health Insurance* and *Employee's Health Insurance*. It is compulsory to be insured under one of those schemes and, taking into account their age and their profession, people are included in either type of insurance.<sup>5</sup> The system is funded through insurance premiums, public funds (tax), and co-payment. When compared to private insurances its advantage is that premiums are levied taking into account the ability to pay, and not on the risk of illness. The national government as the largest of the group of health insurance carriers is most likely the most distinctive element of Japan's health insurance system nowadays.

*Employee's Health Insurance* is formed by the Health Insurance Society, with 32.58 million subscribers<sup>6</sup> and

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