State of Usage and Problems Regarding Childcare Centers for Sick Children in Gifu City, Japan

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Abstract

In Japan, a system of childcare centers for sick children was instituted in 1995 and the number of users has been increasing. In Gifu city, care for sick children was started by the Fukutomi Children's Clinic in April 1996, and the number of facilities that provide such care increased to four by 2000. Many children who use such childcare centers for sick children are less than one year old. Due to seasonal variation, there were more users in winter. The number of childcare centers for sick children is expected to increase due to societal requirement. Based on our experience, the required capacity is considered to be one child per approximately 1,000 preschool children, and one child per 200 children who attend childcare centers.

Key words Childcare, Sick children, Day care center

Introduction

In Gifu city, the first childcare center for sick children was opened in 1995, and since then the number of such facilities has increased to four. They serve as a significant support for working mothers. Care for sick children itself has become accepted by society and is now recognized as a form of childcare. We studied the necessary number and capacity of childcare centers for sick children in Gifu city.

Subjects and Methods

The subjects studied were sick children who used the childcare center of the Fukutomi Children's Clinic. We studied the childcare records of the clinic from 1996 to 2004. Data on the age of the children, the number of children per year, per month of the year, and per disease were included.

Results

Number of users (Table 1)

The numbers of users for the eight years were as follows: 169 (children) for 1996, 566 for 1997, 763 for 1998, 1,053 for 1999, 1,268 for 2000, 1,583 for 2001, 1,206 for 2002, 1,345 for 2003, 1,748 for 2004. After 1999, these numbers were more than 1,000 and gradually increased yearly. The number was the largest in 2004, reaching 1,748.

Number of users by month (Table 1)

The number of users by month tended to be high in winter, that is, from December through March, and low in summer, yearly.

Number of users by disease (Table 2)

According to disease, the numbers of users were high (68 to 80%), for common cold symptoms such as fever and cough, and low (0.7 to 5.2%)

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Table 1 Number of usage of sick children by month of the year, and by year

Month \ Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
1	0	19	38	79	172	73	92	165	103	741
2	0	27	79	101	138	128	122	92	220	907
3	0	24	45	141	116	144	119	124	182	895
4	1	70	41	106	100	157	86	150	176	887
5	8	77	44	63	77	147	98	102	121	737
6	23	39	75	85	86	162	99	102	128	799
7	21	62	74	87	108	155	122	103	135	867
8	25	29	45	55	73	115	83	121	148	694
9	22	37	62	72	98	72	82	51	93	589
10	12	37	76	68	74	80	78	77	109	611
11	14	71	75	70	87	186	100	100	145	848
12	43	74	109	126	139	164	125	158	188	1,126
Total	169	566	763	1,053	1,268	1,583	1,206	1,345	1,748	9,701

Table 2 Number of usage of sick children by disease

Disease \ Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
Common cold	137	397	573	839	986	1,077	845	981	1,257	7,092
Chicken pox	4	40	69	66	38	114	16	56	96	499
Measles	0	26	0	32	16	0	0	0	0	74
Mumps	11	28	67	13	26	9	46	2	100	302
Gastroenteritis	0	14	5	28	86	86	96	119	74	508
Impetigo	6	0	6	9	7	7	5	26	25	91
Bronchial asthma	0	0	0	7	19	12	30	12	9	89
Influenza	0	0	16	0	10	47	21	37	149	280
Hand foot mouth disease	0	30	11	0	20	20	89	0	16	186
Acute otitis media	0	8	0	2	11	40	5	21	1	88
Others	11	23	16	57	49	171	53	91	21	492
Total	169	566	763	1,053	1,268	1,583	1,206	1,345	1,748	9,701

for infectious diseases, such as measles and chicken pox.

Number of users by age (Table 3)

According to age, one year olds were the most frequent users yearly. The number of users decreased as age increased. A comparison of use between users at age three years or younger, and users four or older, showed a significantly large number of users for children of the former ($P<0.05$).

Use of four childcare centers for sick children in Gifu city (Table 4)

In Gifu city, a childcare center for sick children opened 1996, and the number of such centers increased to two in 1997, and to four in 2000. The number of users was the highest in 2004, at 4,398.

After 2001, the number of users was more than 3,000 and it gradually increased year-by-year.

Discussion

Childcare centers for sick children serve as a nursery for children who cannot attended a regular nursery due to sickness. This system of childcare centers for sick children in Japan differs from those in other countries. Several studies of day care centers for sick children have been conducted.[1-6] The history of childcare centers for

Table 3 Number of usage of sick children by age

Age \ Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total	
0	23	38	18	97	45	100	58	95	49	523	
1	47	246	272	318	363	436	228	279	314	2,503	
2	29	131	181	241	283	249	263	231	260	1,868	
3	14	67	94	176	236	257	155	152	279	1,430	*
4	24	43	98	82	121	271	151	145	197	1,132	
5	20	24	48	61	55	126	175	185	157	851	
6	8	9	48	28	60	34	48	123	132	490	
7–9	4	7	2	50	83	71	106	83	276	682	
10	0	1	2	0	22	39	22	52	84	222	
Total	169	566	763	1,053	1,268	1,583	1,206	1,345	1,748	9,701	

*: $P<0.05$

Table 4 Number of usage of the four childcare centers for sick children in Gifu city

Center \ Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
A	169	566	763	1,053	1,268	1,583	1,206	1,345	1,748	9,701
B		108	445	516	479	698	730	744	815	4,535
C					429	931	680	687	849	3,576
D					272	758	822	941	986	3,779
Total	169	674	1,208	1,569	2,448	3,970	3,438	3,717	4,398	21,591

sick children in Japan started in large cities, such as Osaka and Tokyo, approximately 30 years ago. Working mothers started childcare centers where they could leave their sick children. The Health and Welfare Ministry recognized the need for such childcare centers, and started a day service model project for sick children in 1994. In 1995, the ministry institutionalized childcare for sick children, which gained recognition throughout Japan. In Gifu city, Fukutomi Children's Clinic started a childcare center for sick children in 1996. Subsequently, in 2000, the number of such facilities increased to four. At present, there are approximately 400 childcare centers for sick children nationwide, and the number continues to increase. A survey of the numbers of users of the four childcare centers for sick children in Gifu city for each year revealed that the number of users of each center increased steadily, and that, after the number of centers increased to four, the increase in the number of users slowed down. This indicates that four is the appropriate number of childcare centers for sick children in Gifu city, considering that the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare set a target of one facility per 100,000 population, and that the population of the city is approximately 410,000.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare announced that small childcare centers for sick children, and childcare workers being dispatched are part of the ministry's childcare activities. It was considered necessary to estimate the required capacity for the area, based on the number of children, and the number of children who attend childcare centers, in addition to the number of childcare centers for sick children. We considered the required capacity based on our experience. For example, in Gifu city, which has a population of 410,000, there are approximately 26,700 preschool children at age six years or younger, of which approximately 4,900 children attend childcare centers. The present capacity of each of the four childcare centers for sick children in the city is six, with a total capacity of 24. Considering these facts, the required capacity is one child per approximately 1,000 preschool children, and one child per 200 children who attend childcare centers. Taking into consideration the rate of use of

such centers, the annual number of actual users is 3,700; the daily number of users is 12 to 13, considering that the annual number of days of use is 300. As such, the rate of use is approximately 50% of the total capacity. Although the average rate of use annually is 50%, this excess level is considered necessary, because of the large difference in the number of users between winter and summer, and the use being temporary. The capacity and rates of use mentioned here are only those for Gifu city, but they can be used as an approximate standard when the number of childcare centers for sick children increase in other cities in the future.

After childcare centers for sick children were opened, the number of parents taking leave from work to take care of a child who suddenly became sick, and that of parents leaving a sick child with grandparents, significantly decreased, and unfavorable situations for children, such as being left with a friend of the parent, were often avoided. The increasing number of uses of childcare centers for sick children indicates that the requirement of childcare for sick children has been recognized.[7] Reports state that: Some parents who wanted to take care of their sick children themselves initially had concerns and difficulties in leaving their children in childcare centers; however, once they became accustomed to leaving their children in childcare centers for sick children, their concern and sense of discomfort decreased, and their trust toward the center's staff, such as nurses, increased. Other reports reveal that there was a reduction in the number of complaints from mothers in workplaces, the mothers were less often complained about or removed from responsible positions because they had stopped taking leave from work due to their children's illness. These reports show that childcare centers for sick children, which can be used without due concern to parents and is now considered necessary owing to the increase in the number of working mothers, is an accepted aspect in the field of childcare.

As many users of childcare centers for sick children are at age three years or younger, and children with different diseases are taken care of simultaneously, there are concerns about disease transmission among users and the psychological effect on users.[8] However, there have been no reports on new infection or the transmission of diseases in childcare centers for sick children, or such a psychological effect, and care in such centers for sick children seems to have been smoothly conducted thus far.

A childcare center for sick children is a great help to working mothers, and is a necessary aspect of childcare. The number of childcare centers is increasing nationwide. However, the working conditions of mothers have diversified, such as working early mornings and late evenings, and also on holidays, in addition to the increasing employment rate of mothers, perhaps due to the sluggish economy. It is desirable for childcare centers for sick children to improve their services so that they are easily accessible to working mothers. There are various changes in the working conditions of mothers, social structure, and concepts regarding child-rearing, which are not always easy to consider in the operation of childcare centers for sick children, but they should always be addressed by both the administration and implementing facilities to further improve the system to meet the requirements of working mothers.

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