

## Getting hold of the no-baby problem

By GEOFF BOTTING

Back in 1990, then Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa was asked what he thought the government should do about Japan's plummeting birthrate.



"The government shouldn't involve itself in people's private lives," he snapped.

How things have changed. Just recently, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called the birthrate, which fell to an all-time low of 1.25 in 2005, the government's "most critical issue."

**Yomiuri Weekly** (June 25), in search of extreme countermeasures, talks to some of the nation's most outspoken commentators on the topic.

One is marriage counselor Mayumi Futamatsu, who believes the main problem is that people are too busy working to be "on the job," so to speak.

"A prominent worry expressed by women is that they don't have any sex because their husbands are too tired (from working)," she says.

Futamatsu's solutions include a ban on enforced overtime at workplaces and the establishment of a "Couple's Day," a holiday when couples would be encouraged to spend the entire day together.

Shigeki Matsuda, a researcher at Daiichi Life Research Institute Inc., sees education reform as key in dealing with the birthrate problem. Specifically, the cost of attending school and college needs to be lowered, he asserts, as many childless couples cite education costs as the main reason for holding back on starting families.

"We need to change the widespread attitude that parents should foot the entire education bill," Matsuda argues. Instead, students should

be expected to bear the cost of college, while more scholarships should be made available.

Meanwhile, **Shukan Asahi** (June 23) warns that even if couples choose to have kids, they may have trouble finding a bed in a maternity hospital, as a dire shortage of facilities has developed.

Compared to 2,452 hospitals with maternity centers in 1989, according to Health Ministry statistics, that number had dwindled by about a third to 1,666 in 2004.

Shukan Asahi cites the case of one pregnant woman who, when pregnant with her second child, returned to the hospital where she'd had her first and was advised to take her business elsewhere.

"It had a good maternity center, so giving birth there would have been great," she sighs.

It's a vicious cycle -- as the birthrate spirals downward, more hospitals shut down or consolidate, leaving fewer places where expectant mothers can go to bear children.

In an 11-item section titled "Konna Nihon ni Dare ga shita (Who made Japan like this?)," **Shukan Taishu** (June 26) blames the falling birthrate on the guys, citing a recent study that suggests Japanese men may suffer from weakened sperm.

In a joint study by researchers in Japan and Europe, sperm density and activity levels in men in Japan and four European nations were compared. The results showed Finnish men on average had 30 percent higher sperm counts than their counterparts in Japan, with levels among Japanese males under age 40 disturbingly low.

As to why, "Researchers have pointed out the danger of hormone receptor chemicals released by instant noodle containers as well as high levels of residual pesticides in vegetables," notes a writer for a scientific journal.

In addition, the apparent low frequency of sex among Japanese couples also received many disapproving clucks when British condom manufacturer Durex announced the results of its annual worldwide survey.

Unless the government grabs the bull by the horns and establishes a "Ministry of Sex," Shukan Taishu predicts, that giant sucking sound you hear might be Japan, slipping beneath the waves.

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