

LIFE GUIDE

Japan's maternal and child health handbook benefits the world



Versions of Japan's handbook on maternity, childbirth and childrearing are appearing in Africa, Asia and elsewhere

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JAPANESE people take the existence of the *Maternal and Child Health Handbook* (hereinafter referred to as the “*MCH Handbook*”) for granted. In 1948, after the Second World War, the Ministry of Welfare (present Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare) started issuing this handbook to protect the welfare of children in Japan. The handbook has been introduced to countries such as Indonesia, Palestine and Vietnam since 1992 through an initiative to implement technical assistance via JICA's Maternal and Child Health Project. Miyako Shinohara, who is a marketing officer of the nonprofit organization HANDS, which has been supporting JICA's for implementing *MCH Handbook* with its extensive experience and expertise, described their activities.

“Countries around the world have various recordkeeping tools for pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing, but you won't find them combined in a single volume like Japan's *MCH Handbook* with comprehensive information from the mother's pregnancy, childbirth and all the way to childrearing,” says Shinohara.

HANDS representative Dr. Yasuhide Nakamura created a simplified version of the *MCH Handbook* over twenty years ago in Indonesia, where he had taken a post as a maternal and child health expert for JICA. About ten years later, he was contacted by an Indonesian doctor visiting Japan for training who was hoping to start a project to disseminate the handbook in Indonesia. This led to the development of a handbook in Indonesia which integrated the existing maternal and child health record cards in Indonesia into a single volume like the Japan's *MCH Handbook*.

“We have learned from past experience that there are several things very important if you are trying to distribute these handbooks,” Shinohara notes. “The first is to develop a handbook with the ownership of the local people. The project works better when we simply provide the initial opportunities, help and observe them part of the way, while each country continues the rest on its own.” There are often different ethnic groups, languages and childbirth cultures, even within the same country, she adds, and local professionals such as doctors and midwives are apparently the ones who can develop the best standard while taking those factors into account. Even if it seem irrational to foreigners presenting the contents rooted in local customs is the most important thing to consider.

“The second point is not to try to make a perfect handbook from the beginning,” Shinohara continues. “It is important to disseminate handbooks to as many mothers and children as possible by utilizing the existing materials of maternal and child health services, such as growth monitoring charts, and only adding the merits of the *MCH Handbook* to develop it into a single volume. Further details can be revised later when necessary.”

HANDS supports the International Conference of Maternal and Child Health Handbook every two years. The ninth conference is set to be held in Cameroon in 2014, bringing together healthcare professionals from countries and



A Palestinian mother with her baby and handbook

regions around the world. This conference plays a major role not only as a catalyst for increasing awareness of the handbook’s existence and distribution to countries where it is needed, but also for scaling up *MCH Handbook* projects, which so far have been carried out as small pilot projects within countries, into nationwide projects.

“When we visit countries where we have helped disseminate these handbooks and talk to the people about them, they respond, ‘Oh, I have one of those, too. Our country is really proud of having them,’ ” Shinohara says. “Many even think that their country has had them all along. Hearing those words makes me glad that the handbooks have spread this far due to the efforts and leadership of local people while we supported them.” Furthermore, the widespread use of versions of the *MCH Handbook* led to responses such as “It has increased my knowledge of pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing,” and “It has improved the frequency of prenatal checkups and vaccine coverage.”

More than mere recordkeeping tools, these handbooks have a lot of potential to benefit everyone; not only mothers and children but fathers and medical professionals as well. “I think it presents a great opportunity to strengthen the bonds between Japan and the world by letting the Japanese people know how much Japan’s *MCH Handbook* has been utilized to help to improve the health of others around the world,” says Shinohara. **■**



Going over the essential data at a health center in Indonesia
PHOTO: HANDS