

Elderly getting chance to benefit from Scandinavian nation's long history of care-giving

Swede on mission to help Japan seniors

WHO'S WHO

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STAFF WRITER

Gustav Strandell believes that if there is something good about his home country, Sweden, that he can bring to Japan, it's the concept and some of the technical skills of its social welfare system developed over its 100-year-plus history as an aging society.

Born in the small town of Tyreso, near Stockholm, Strandell has over the past decade tried to spread in this country Swedish ideas about nursing care for the elderly with a strong focus on delaying the progress of dementia.

After extensively researching the nursing care system here, he said he found what was lacking in many of the elderly homes: efforts to enable the elderly to live in an environment as close as possible to conditions they were living in when they were with their own families.

A home for seniors "has to be built within a community where the elderly people do not feel cut off from society," he said.

Such concepts are the norm in elderly homes in Sweden, said the 37-year-old Strandell.

"Not everything about the Swedish nursing care system is good, but I found out that there are some good things (about it) that I can bring into the Japanese system," he said.

In 2001, he became a founding member of the Swedish Care Institute in Japan, which was set up by the Swedish Embassy to offer training programs in Sweden about the country's nursing care practices. He has also regularly held lectures and seminars at universities and other venues in Japan.

When the Japan-Sweden Care Institute K.K. was established to follow up on these activities, Strandell became project manager, and then director, of the institute.

One of the major problems confronting social welfare programs in Japan, he said, is the shortage of caregivers.

"We definitely need more caregivers at elderly homes throughout the country, but Japan is slow in dealing with the issue," he said, noting that the nation will need to double the number of caregivers by 2025 to meet rising demand as it continues to see an increase in its elderly population.

Currently, Strandell is the general manager at a home for the elderly in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture. Built in 2009, the facility comprises a day service center, a short stay center and a home for the elderly.

He has been invited by a real estate developer who supported his ideas about nursing care and asked him to introduce some Swedish practices into the facility's operations.

Strandell initially became involved with the home's operation as a consultant, giving advice about ways to give effective care to its residents and users.

The facility tries to bring relaxation to the elderly by using various methods of care widely used in Sweden, including "Bunne music therapy," which uses special musical instruments such as a plain type of guitar, flute and chime bar with the elderly can easily learn to play.

Such care, he said, is intended to alleviate the progression of dementia.

"Sweden was already an aging society back in 1890, when 7 percent of its population was over 65 years old. It continued to be a country with the highest proportion of elderly in the population around the world — until it was overtaken by Japan in 1995," he said.

With its long history as an aging society, Sweden has "tried to change its nursing care system bit by bit — from ways of

manufacturing nursing care goods to ways of providing care, and how to build nursing care homes."

"In Sweden, the concept of nursing care comes first," he said, noting that the basic principle is that the elderly needing care should stay within and interact with the local community. "Then, streets and public facilities are built based on that concept, and then nursing care is actually given to the elderly," he said.

Japan, too, should first come up with a solid concept about nursing care for the elderly.

Strandell first became interested in Japan through kendo. At age 14, he came across a

'A lot of the elderly homes were built in the suburbs and were separated from the local communities.'

kendo dojo in Stockholm, fell in love with the sport, and continued it for 10 years.

Strandell first came to Japan in 1992 as an exchange student at Waseda University Senior High School in Tokyo.

He studied Japanese and kendo there while staying with a Japanese family for 10 months.

"I was really surprised at how hard working Japanese people were, especially students at Waseda's kendo club. I couldn't believe that they practiced kendo almost every day, even during the hot and humid summer season," Strandell said.

At the kendo club, he practiced with the other members almost every day.

"The summer of 1992 became unforgettable to me. I experienced hard work through kendo, made a lot of Japanese friends and became close to my host family. It was at that time that I decided to live in Japan," he noted.

He said he vaguely felt that there was something he could do in Japan — and that he had some kind of role to fulfill.

Later, he found out what that "something" was: introducing the concept of the social security system of his country in Japan.

Strandell returned to Japan half a dozen times over the next decade — first to study at Hokkaido Tokai University as an exchange student from Stockholm University. There, visits to nearby nursing homes were part of the study program. He went on to engage in further research in the field of Sweden and Japan's social welfare systems, which he made a thesis for the master's degree.

He spent the following several years visiting nearly 250 elderly care homes throughout the country, where he found both "good and bad facilities."

"At that time, a lot of the elderly homes were built in the suburbs and were separated from the local communities," said Strandell. "I was shocked when I visited one of the homes. There was a piano bar in the entrance, but when I went inside, the space looked very dark, dull and lacking energy to me. About six to eight people were living in one room, and they didn't have any privacy."

Strandell says his strong relationship with people he met here has made him stay in Japan.

He says he has been greatly influenced, for example, by the late architect and Kyoto University professor Tadashi Toyama, whom he had a chance to meet at his home to listen extensively to his ideas on living environments for the elderly.

Strandell is married to a Japanese woman and they have two children. He intends to



Caregiver: Gustav Strandell gives an interview at the Maihama Club Shin-Urayasu Forum, a home for the elderly, in Urayasu, Chiba Prefecture, where he works as general manager. MAMI MARUKO

spend the rest of his life in Japan.

He said the elderly home in Urayasu is a place where he can feel tense and relaxed at the same time.

"It's a place where I can be my real self," he said, adding that he has nothing to hide from the elderly residents. "When you talk to an elderly person who has gone through so many things in life, there is no use in hiding anything. An 80-year-old can immediately tell if you're telling a lie.

"Sometimes, young Japanese people say

that they can't find a meaning in life. They are healthy, young, can enjoy eating and drinking, and lead a safe life in society, but can't find significance in life. It's surprising to find that the elderly in their 80s and 90s are leading a more meaningful life than them," he said.

"At least I gain hope from seeing elderly people with various diseases finding meaning and significance in life, and leading a wonderful life. It gives me hope that even if I grow old and become sick, I can lead a fruitful life like theirs."