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## Comprehensive Women’s Health Support: An Essential Component to Increase the Participation of Women in Japan’s Workforce

### Situation

Today, the advancement of women is a key part of the Japanese government’s growth strategy. Japan has a significant gap in economic opportunities and advancement for women versus men when compared to other countries. Japan ranked 104 out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index.<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Abe has recognized this gap, noting that “Women are Japan’s most underutilized resource,”<sup>2</sup> and has cited the enhancement of women’s participation and advancement as one of the key pillars of Abenomics for the economic revitalization of Japan. Although the main focus of the Japanese government has been on support for working mothers with regard to childcare, and measures to increase the number of women in managerial positions, comprehensive health support is also critical to the attainment of these goals.

There are opportunities to improve the current environment in support of women’s health. Efforts focused on improving women’s knowledge and awareness of health, and comprehensive health directives to include regular screening for breast cancer, HPV and other gender-specific health risks would be beneficial to women and to Japanese society as a whole.

Specific government direction for regular treatment and testing for female-specific disease and health risks is expected to contribute to improved medical outcomes in terms of management of health conditions and disease control.

Gynecologists have a unique expertise in this field.

### Increased Comprehensive Screening Can Decrease Women’s Health Risks

With lifestyles changing, today’s women experience their first menstruation at a younger age and bear children at a later age, and fewer

times. This results in fewer interruptions in menstruation than in the past.

Because of the increased number of menstruations that women now experience in their life, health risks associated with menstruation, including endometriosis and dysmenorrhea, are on the increase. Although menstrual symptoms (e.g., pain, bleeding) may be considered neither severe nor critical compared to cancer or other diseases, the vast majority of Japanese women suffer from menstrual symptoms every month, which when severe, leads to significant pain, distress and work loss; yet few of them consult a gynecologist about these symptoms.<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that the economic burden associated with menstrual symptoms reaches JPY680 billion annually, 72 percent of which is associated with work productivity loss.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, if menstrual symptoms are left untreated, the risks of infertility and ovarian cancer may increase.

### Current Policy

Currently, a lack of guidelines for comprehensive health checks for women may lead to a situation in which otherwise treatable women’s life cycle changes remain undiagnosed and therefore are not managed, leading to a possible increase in risk of infertility and ovarian cancer. Indeed, the incidence of ovarian cancer in Japanese women is 2.5 times higher compared to 35 years ago.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore critical to enhance comprehensive support for women’s health to minimize such health risks.

### Recommendation

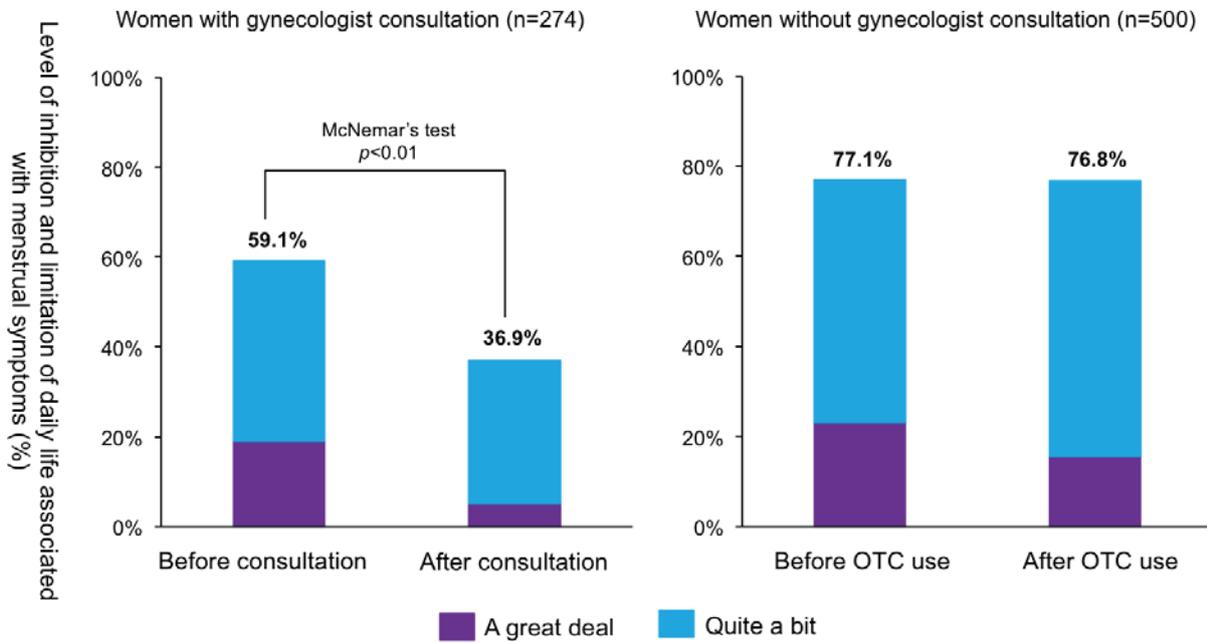
Facilitating access to women’s healthcare and encouraging women to consult a gynecologist, e.g., by providing annual gynecologist check-ups from the onset of puberty — a standard practice in most other developed countries — and by offering women’s health education at schools and universities, will improve health outcomes and work productivity losses for women in Japan.

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## References

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2. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. Speech on Growth Strategy by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Japan National Press Club. April 19, 2013. Accessed January 2015. Available at: [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201304/19speech\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201304/19speech_e.html)
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4. Matsuda A, Matsuda T, Shibata A, Katanoda K, Sobue T, Nishimoto H and The Japan Cancer Surveillance Research Group. Cancer Incidence and Incidence Rates in Japan in 2008: A Study of 25 Population-based Cancer Registries for the Monitoring of Cancer Incidence in Japan (MCIJ) Project. *Japanese Journal of Clinical Oncology*, 44(4): 388-396, 2013

## 25. Improvement of daily life by gynecologist consultation (Adapted from Figure 5, International Journal of Women's Health 2014:6 11–23, Dove Medical Press)



## 25. Economic burden associated with menstrual symptoms in Japan (Adapted from Table 2, Journal of Medical Economics 2013, 1-12, Informa Healthcare<sup>3</sup>)

