

Duty and Humanity

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Last Monday, I woke up and brushed my teeth. After that I got dressed, ate breakfast and got ready for school. I said ‘good-bye’ and left home. Amazing! You may be wondering, “Why is this special?” I’m a normal 15-year-old student. I may be a little short and my grades could be a little better, but otherwise I’m pretty much a standard ‘Made in Japan’ boy. The reason why my daily activities are special can be expressed in one number: 798.

For the first four months of my life I was in an incubator. I could only drink 1cc of my mother’s milk at a time. I was born prematurely at a weight of only 798g. My parents were extremely worried about me. The doctors and nurses at the hospital gave me the best possible care they could. After months of help from the staff and love from my parents, I was able to go home and start my life. Since I have been old enough to understand how lucky I am, I have wanted to learn more about my birth.

This summer I spoke to Doctor Fukuhara at the Hiroshima Prefectural Hospital. She told me that NICUs (Neonatal Intensive Care Units) in Japan are the best in the world for one reason: 義理と人情 (which means duty and humanity). In Japan, newborns of less than 300g or 23 weeks of gestation have the highest chance of survival in the world. This is thanks to the dedication of the staff and the belief that no child is too small to save. In other countries, guidelines restrict the access of incubators to extreme low weight babies. In the United States and Britain, a child of less than 500g or 24 weeks of gestation is considered too small to revive. The reasons for these limits are the high risk of the child having a lifelong disability (not only an emotional but financial burden for families), and the high cost of caring for the child (not only in terms of hours of care but also the hefty price of an incubator—over ¥20 million). If your child’s birth weight were extremely low, would you accept these rules?

The question that must be asked is: “What limits should a society have on saving lives?” Over 20 million premature babies are born in the world every year, and, unfortunately, over 4 million of them die. With today’s advanced medical technology, is this truly necessary? Perhaps guidelines and rules can be put aside for the sake of duty and humanity; something which Japanese physicians have shown to be possible. Although our country may have one of the world’s lowest birth rates, I am proud to tell you that those who are born receive the world’s best care.

I’m not sure what my future will be like but I want to have the opportunity to give people as much hope as Dr. Fukuhara does. I do know that without the help of others I would not be standing here today. I want all children to have the same opportunity to live as I do. Albert Einstein once said, “Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning.” Whatever my future brings I know that duty and humanity will guide my way.

(1st Prize of the 66th Contest, 2014)