



JOCV participant Yoko Togashi sits with villagers during a religious ceremony.

Including Local Values in Volunteer Efforts

Yoko Togashi was just a student in junior high school when a television program about the volunteer efforts of a Japanese nurse in Africa first sparked her interest in overseas assistance. Togashi, inspired by the nurse's plea that more medical volunteers in the field would mean more lives being saved, also hoped one day to do volunteer work of her own in Africa.

For some time even after becoming a nurse, though, she kept her dream to herself. It was not until she became involved in a program providing medical care to communities on Japan's many remote islands that she again began thinking about traveling to Africa. She discovered while spending time in parts of Okinawa and Kagoshima Prefecture that all places have their own unique and pleasant aspects. Certain that this held true with Africa as well, she decided to travel to the continent and see how locals lived.

VILLAGE ASPIRATIONS

Togashi came to Benin with the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) program in December 2013. She was stationed at the Dogbo Health Center in Kouffo County, where after one month observing activities at the center's various departments, such as those handling obstetrics and HIV/AIDS, she began working in the vaccination unit. Her duties consisted chiefly of managing and updating patients' records and weighing babies and children prior to their inoculation.

From the beginning of her dispatch, Togashi was curious about the situation at other centers. After talking with the head nurse, she obtained permission to visit the six other health centers in the county.

During her visits she not only observed situations at different medical centers but also paid visits to nearby villages. There, she used an interpreter to talk with local residents, who mainly spoke the local Aja language, to learn how they viewed the centers and ask them what services they wanted the facilities to provide. It was in this way that she learned that malaria was the most common malady affecting patients at all the medical centers.



Togashi conducts a malaria prevention survey in a village (left) and asks questions during a visit to a health center in Kouffo County.

265 HOUSEHOLDS IN 53 VILLAGES

After her return to the Dogbo Health Center, Togashi continued working in the vaccination unit. One change she implemented there was the installation of a hand-washing space. The facility lacked a sink and other equipment where staff could wash their hands, so she set up an area with a bucket and soap. Thanks to her efforts, workers began to scrub their hands regularly. She also began working with another nurse to deliver malaria medication free of charge to villages in Dogbo. It was through these efforts that she became interested in learning more about how residents in the surrounding villages lived.

Togashi again expressed her feelings to the head nurse, who in 2014 allowed her to travel to different villages to conduct a month-long survey on malaria prevention methods.

"I wanted to find out why the disease was so rampant," explains Togashi. "I focused on mothers with children up to five years old. I visited five households in each of the 53 villages in Dogbo for a total of 265 homes. Questions were formed to provide a quick and concise impression of the day-to-day lives of the women. For example, the mosquito responsible for transmitting malaria is active after dusk, so I would ask the women what time they usually prepared dinner. I'd have them show me their living space while asking them how they

stored water and whether they had mosquito nets. I came to understand how important it was for prevention efforts be carried out with consideration for the lifestyle of village residents."

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL VIEWPOINT

Volunteer efforts at medical facilities were suspended in September 2014 following the outbreak of Ebola hemorrhagic fever in West Africa. Togashi had the option of ending her term of dispatch early, but she chose to carry on her efforts. Since then, she has been involved in helping look after the health and wellbeing of residents in villages where traditional Voodoo practices form the base of medical care, as well as working with villagers to ascertain the core needs of communities.

According to Togashi, there are few areas where she provides advice as a medical specialist. "For the most part, I don't interact with people from a nursing standpoint. It's easy from a position of authority to tell people not to do something, but you may end up offending their lifestyle, traditions, and way of thinking. I don't want to remain someone who has simply come to provide assistance. My goal is to carry out my work from the viewpoint of the residents themselves, understanding what it is they really want and considering how they feel and perceive their surroundings."



To better understand the lives of residents, Togashi shares a meal with village children and helps collect water from a communal well.