Editor’s Note: The April 2000 Edition of JAPA is dedicated to the publication of eight original research articles from Japan. The associate editor for the Japan Special Edition of JAPA is Dr. Kiyoji Tanaka of the University of Tsukuba. The idea for a Japan Special Edition was initially formulated several years ago, and Dr. Tanaka and his colleagues have dedicated a considerable amount of time and energy over the past 2 years toward its publication. Initially, they solicited manuscripts from Japanese researchers involved in different aspects of the study of successful aging. Submitted articles underwent two levels of peer review. The first stage of the review process occurred in Japan. This stage involved selecting independent expert reviewers who evaluated the manuscripts using the standard JAPA blind-review format. The manuscripts that were selected as a result of the initial review were then forwarded to the editorial offices of JAPA and underwent an additional stage of peer review.

Wojtek J. Chodzko-Zajko
Editor

Successful Aging in Japan:
An Introduction to the Japan Special Edition

Japan is aging at an unprecedented rate. In 1955 only 5% of the Japanese population were over 65 years of age. However, by 1990 this proportion had reached 12%. The Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare estimates that, by the year 2025, approximately 23–26% of the population will be over 65 (Tanaka & Chodzko-Zajko, 1998). This amounts to well in excess of 30 million people. The demographic projections are even more remarkable for the very old. For example, those over the age of 75 represented only 1% of the Japanese population in 1950, 2% in 1970, and 4% in 1990. It is predicted that this percentage will climb to more than 12% by 2025. These projections strongly suggest that, for the foreseeable future, Japan will continue to be among the world’s leaders with respect to both the longevity and the size of its older adult population (Harada, 1994).

The International Year of Older Persons—1999 focused the attention of the world on the many challenges facing society as a result of the remarkable aging of the population. In Japan, the realization that the nation is aging rapidly has led some to voice concerns about the implications for society as a whole. Many have suggested that these increases in life expectancy will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of people who suffer from chronic diseases and disabling conditions. However, aging need not always be associated with decline and decay. Rather, it is increasingly clear that many older people are able to lead active, healthy, productive, and independent lives well into their 80s and 90s. In recent years significant
interest has focused on examining lifestyle interventions that can help older people age “successfully.” Physical activity has been proposed as a key factor for preserving and enhancing quality of life in old age.

In Japan, the Ministry of Health and Welfare recently issued National Physical Activity and Health Promotion Guidelines that strongly endorse participation in regular physical activity (See Appendix). These guidelines stress that physical activities that promote health and well-being are not limited to exercise and sports but also include a broad range of everyday activities that can be performed easily, enjoyably, and continuously by people of all ages and both sexes. An underlying principle throughout the report is the notion that, in order to attain optimal health benefits, physical activity must be incorporated into everyday life along with appropriate nutrition, adequate rest, and other positive lifestyle habits.

In this special edition of the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, eight articles are published to provide JAPA readers with a glimpse of several research and clinical programs focusing on successful aging in Japan. The special edition begins with three articles that describe state-of-the-art research and clinical programs. In the first article, Professor Hiroshi Shibata presents an overview of the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology—Longitudinal Interdisciplinary Study on Aging (TMIG-LISA). The TMIG-LISA is a government-funded research project that was designed to assess the extent to which it might be possible to retard the rate of the aging process and prevent geriatric diseases and chronic conditions. The second program described is the University of Tsukuba’s TARA—Quality of Life of Older Adults Assessment Project, which is directed by Dr. Kiyoji Tanaka. The TARA project was designed to develop a series of test batteries for assessing functional status and quality of life in older adults (Tanaka, 1997). In the third article, Dr. Takashi Arao, director of the Meiji Physical Fitness Research Institute, describes a life insurance company-sponsored program whose primary mission is to contribute to the health, longevity, and active living of the general public in Japan.

In addition to describing specific research and clinical programs, the special edition includes five research articles that illustrate some common approaches to
experimental investigation in the area of successful aging. An example of an experimental investigation from the exercise sciences is provided by Dr. Nobuo Takeshima et al. This study was undertaken to determine the accuracy of measuring heart rate by radial artery palpation in elderly individuals. The study concludes that age decrements in vibrotactile sensitivity of the fingers might be associated with errors when older people determine their own heart rate by radial artery palpation. In the next article, Dr. Yoshiyuki Ohno et al. examine the relationships between social activity and successful aging in over 5,000 Japanese seniors. This study found that maintaining general health habits and lifestyles is an important determinant for successful aging and high social activity in old age.

Dr. Hisao Osada et al. present a study that examines the relationship between psychological well-being and selected physical conditions in urban and rural older adults. This 2-year longitudinal analysis was conducted as part of the TMIG-LISA. The article is followed by one by Dr. Yoshinori Fujiwara et al., who present the results of a study that investigated the effect of chronic medical conditions on changes in functional capacity in older Japanese adults. This study was also part of the TMIG-LISA. It provides keen insight on the importance of controlling chronic medical conditions via active lifestyles.

In the final research article of the special edition, Dr. Kiyoji Tanaka et al., from the University of Tsukuba, describe a TARA research project that was designed to examine the interrelationships among functional fitness and vital age scores in older Japanese women. This study suggests that evaluating both functional fitness and coronary risk factors is necessary for comprehensive assessment of health and functional status in older women. This is followed by an article describing Aotake, a unique Japanese exercise program.

Finally, we reprint as an appendix to the special issue an article from JAPA 7(3) outlining the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare’s guidelines on physical activity and health promotion.

As associate editor for the Japan special edition of the Journal of Aging and Physical Activity, I would like to thank all the individuals who contributed to its production. I hope that the publication of this issue will provide the readers of JAPA with some new insights into research and clinical practice in the area of aging in Japan and that this publication will result in greater international collaboration and exchange. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the editorial board of JAPA for providing us with the opportunity to share our work with the academic community.

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References