

## PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE: Firm strives to export business model to help disabled people

By HIDEO SATO/ Staff Writer

March 4, 2017 at 07:20 JST



Dentist Emi Sumida, right, instructs a woman on how to brush teeth with Oral Peace. (Hideo Sato)



A woman in her 70s who takes care of her husband with dementia at their home in Tokyo was told about Oral Peace by Emi Sumida, 45, a dentist.

The woman has been using the gel for about three years, secure in the knowledge that no harm will come to her husband if he swallows it.

The husband is bedridden and obtains nutrition through a feeding tube. Although he does not eat anything, he must still keep his mouth clean to prevent bacteria from growing and causing pneumonia.

Twice a day, the wife puts Oral Peace on a sponge brush to clean her husband's teeth. She also uses the spray type several times a day.

Ordinary toothpaste poses a major burden on care-givers because elderly people need to spit it out.

Before discovering Oral Peace, the woman had to take her husband to the dentist to check for cavities.

"Brushing his teeth has become much easier," she said.

Trife has commissioned the 70 or so disabled workers at the Colony Higashi-Murayama facility in western Tokyo to handle shipping of the Oral Peace gel around Japan.

In the last fiscal year, Oral Peace-related sales at Colony Higashi-Murayama exceeded 10 million yen (\$88,000), more than double the figure for the previous year. The facility, which helps

*Editor's note: This is the final of a three-part series on the integration of business and social welfare.*

For care-takers of elderly people, Oral Peace has been a godsend because even toothpaste can be a health hazard.

But the teeth-brushing gel, which is safe to swallow and has created jobs for disabled people, has hit some roadblocks in Trife Inc.'s attempt to expand the business.

Still, the company continues with its efforts to turn a profit and is eyeing new markets. It hopes word spreads about its work to help disabled people improve their lives.

disabled people, has annual sales of about 600 million yen. So Oral Peace has become an important component.

“There are major benefits from being able to stably handle a product that is marketable,” said Takashi Sakamoto, 45, the deputy head of the facility.

Other facilities face problems developing new sales avenues for Oral Peace and turning over benefits in the form of higher wages for their disabled workers.

The Shirane facility in Yokohama’s Asahi Ward employs about 40 disabled workers who are involved in dismantling water supply meters or cleaning parks. It has also been selling Oral Peace for four years.

However, the facility currently makes a profit of only about 120,000 yen from the gel a year.

“While it would be really helpful if we obtained a continual stream of orders from senior citizens’ homes, it is not always easy to persuade such facilities to change from products they have used for a long time,” said Tatsuji Nehashi, the 46-year-old facility head, touching upon the difficulty of expanding sales.

Many facilities handling sales of Oral Peace, such as Shirane, are categorized as Type B under the law on comprehensive support measures for disabled people.

Type B facilities, which employ people who have greater difficulties holding a job, need to only pay their workers a minimum of 3,000 yen a month.

According to the welfare ministry, about 9,000 Type B facilities around Japan employ a total of about 200,000 disabled people.

Their average monthly wage for fiscal 2014 was 14,838 yen, or around 187 yen an hour, less than one-fourth the national average minimum wage.

Toshimichi Takemura, 52, who works in the Social Innovation Program Division at the Nippon Foundation and has been involved in a project to triple the pay at Type B facilities in Tottori Prefecture, explained why the wages remain so low.

“In addition to some facilities that take the easy attitude of being satisfied with just providing a place of work, there are problems with the overall framework because the central government continues to reward facilities with subsidies even if they make insufficient business efforts,” Takemura said.

Daisuke Teshima, the president of Trife, said, “The only thing we can do is to persistently make efforts to expand support for our product.”

Teshima has set his eyes abroad.

He plans to start sales of Oral Peace in Dalian, China, as early as this spring, and he is also seeking to move into Europe by the end of this year.

Teshima eventually wants to export his business model of having disabled people sell Oral Peace teeth-brushing gel.

He feels that Oral Peace could take off even further in Japan if overseas praise is “re-imported” into the nation.

