

# Cash-strapped Japanese abandon senile parents

## Japan

Richard Lloyd Parry Ageo

In feudal Japan it was referred to as *ubasute* or "granny dumping", the custom of abandoning elderly relatives on lonely mountain tops in times of hardship and famine.

Now it has been revived in a new form as desperate Japanese find themselves unable to look after elderly, sick and senile family members.

Welfare organisations are reporting cases of dementia patients who cannot speak or identify themselves being left at clinics or hospitals.

Some charities have even established a service called "senior citizen postbox" a charity office where hard-pressed families can deposit elderly parents, who are then assigned to an old people's home.

"This is the equivalent of granny dumping," said Takanori Fujita, a social worker in the city of Ageo, 24 miles north of Tokyo, whose welfare organisation offers one of these "postboxes". "There are a lot of people who have a certain amount of

income but who still live in poverty and struggle terribly with relatives who can't look after themselves," he added. "They are reluctant to ask for help because they feel it's shameful."

In Saitama prefecture, where Mr Fujita works, about ten elderly people a year are abandoned on the streets, suggesting a national total in the low hundreds.

Typical of such cases is that of a well-dressed man in his 70s found outside a local hospital. He wore a waist pouch with a little money in it but had no identification and was suffering from severe dementia, which left him unable to speak.

"The sad thing is that he'd been well taken care of and well fed," said Mr Fujita. "Someone looked after him as well as they could and then couldn't go on any more." Care home staff called him Taro Yamada, the Japanese equivalent of John Brown.

As many as 50 people a year are taken into care by Mr Fujita's charity. One case involved a single woman in her fifties who gave up work to look after her widowed and senile 88-year-old father. He could not wash or

go to the lavatory by himself, and was prone to hitting and even sexually assaulting his daughter. The woman herself was suicidally depressed and feared that she might kill her father before she brought him to the charity.

A quarter of Japan's 127 million people are over 65, and an estimated 15 per cent of them suffer from some kind of dementia.

Economists predict a crisis in government finances, with a shrinking number of young working taxpayers left to support a growing proportion of pensioners. There will be an explosion of need around 2025, when Japan's postwar baby-boomers reach their mid-seventies.

Wages in Japan have not risen significantly for years, making it hard to save in middle age. More and more people are entering their last years facing genuine poverty, a problem made horrifically clear when Haruo Hayashizaki, 71, set himself alight on a bullet train in 2015. Neighbours reported that he was deep in debt from trying to survive on a pension of ¥120,000 (£830) a month, a third of which went on rent.

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