While in Japan, at the invitation of the Japanese Ventilator Users Network in June, I spent a day with polio survivors in Osaka and another day in Tokyo. I cannot speak Japanese and my gracious hosts supplied translators, but I was immediately struck by the amount of communication that can take place even though there is no common language.

During our informal week-day meetings of comparing polio and post-polio in Japan and the United States, I learned that the major epidemics in Japan were in 1949-51 and 1958-60, when more than 37,000 children contracted polio. Some children during this time were diagnosed as having “brain infantile paralysis,” which would be diagnosed as cerebral palsy today. The oral polio vaccine was introduced in 1961 and it is now mandatory for all children to be vaccinated.

Interestingly, I heard the polio stories of more than 35 survivors, and nobody was older than age three when they had polio and most were 18 months or younger. Most of the survivors had attended regular school and had been employed. Many had been diagnosed with post-polio syndrome and were no longer working.

In Japan, people with disabilities can receive a card that identifies them as a person with a disability at a certain level with seven options for classifying their ability. Having the card entitles them to certain services, such as financial support, equipment (e.g., braces, wheelchairs, custom-made shoes), discounts on mass transportation, etc. Some survivors have had a card since they were young and others have recently acquired theirs as a result of having the late effects of polio.

The number of survivors in Japan is not known, but a survey done in Kitakyushu concluded that the number of polio survivors per 100,000 population is 24.1 and the prevalence of post-polio syndrome is 18.0 per 100,000 population. In the survey, 57.2% reported difficulty in climbing stairs and 55.1% reported muscle weakness.

In 2001, the existing eight polio associations (Sapporo, Aomori, Sendai, Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe and Kitakyushu) formed the Japan Network for Polio Survivors (JNPS). Today, 1,200 polio survivors are members of JNPS.

My Visit with Japan Network for Polio Survivors (JNPS)
Joan L. Headley, MS, Executive Director, Post-Polio Health International, Saint Louis, Missouri

Members of the Tokyo Polio Association with samples of the Walking Bag, luggage that rolls easily in any direction, functions like a walking stick or cane, and is sold by Swany®, a major glove manufacturer. The company’s president, polio survivor Etsuo Miyoshi, is the force behind the development of the Walking Bag.

www.swany.co.jp/wb or www.ezswany.com

My personal translators, polio survivors Yukiko Nakanishi (l) and Haruko Jino (r), at the meeting in Tokyo.

Hiroyuki Naitou, member of the Osaka Polio Network, trying out the iGlide, a computer-controlled wheelchair from Independence Technology, a Johnson & Johnson Company. The iGlide requires minimal effort to control.

www.independence.jp or www.jnj.com/innovations/new_features/INDEPENDENCE_iGLIDE.htm