

What do you really need when you are feeling sick and weak?

At the end of July, I went to a hospital which had gone through a major renovation. At the reception I put my consultation ticket into a receiving machine. Out came my medical record, a ticket and a radio pager. I followed the signs to a number of vending machines and put my ticket in one. What do you think happened? A paper cup and a little kit came out. Were they offering me a drink? No, it was for my urine and blood sample. I followed the instructions, and waited for the consultation. My radio pager announced my turn. Waiting for me in the room was... a human doctor. It wasn't a robot. I felt a little disappointed but also relieved to be talking to a real person at last. And, as you can probably guess, the payment system was automated, too. How amazing! I was able to go through all of the steps without having to talk to a single nurse. All of my necessary medical information was accurately noted on the cards, cups and kits. It was very efficient. Technology is incredible!

And yet... If all things become mechanized, what will happen? I saw many of the older people puzzled as to how to operate the machines. The staff behind the counters were too busy looking at their computers to pay attention to us, and even when they did, it was just to mechanically explain the procedures. I remembered the feeling of relief when I finally saw the doctor. Everyone who had come to use the machines, including myself, was feeling sick and weak. I realized it was reassuring to talk to someone face to face. What we wanted more than efficiency was warmth and reassurance, in other words human interaction.

Japan has a serious shortage of nurses. With the rise in the aged population, there will only be more patients, so the shortage is only going to get worse. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the shortage of nurses will be up to thirteen million by 2025. At this rate, eventually hospitals are going to be completely automated, and only those who are wealthy could afford the warmth and reassurance of a human nurse. This is a very scary vision.

Technological advances make it possible for us to do many things easier and faster. Especially, the advances in accurate and rapid access to medical data can sometimes make a difference between life and death. Technology is an integral part of our lives, not just in hospitals. However, we must beware of expecting technology to be the only answer to all problems. We must always keep in mind that it is just a tool and should ultimately only support, not replace, people. We can't depend on technology to make us happy. Real happiness can only be acquired by interacting face to face with other people. We must remember that especially when we are weak, human contact is necessary and we must develop technology around that concept.

So, a warm smile and a healing hand. When we are feeling sick, that's what we really need.