

Yuzurihara, The Village of Long Life, Reveals Its Secrets

By Bill Sardi



Late in the year 2000 ABC News Prime Time Live sent reporter Connie Chung to a small village about two hours outside of Tokyo. That report drew widespread interest. The report emanated from Yuzurihara, known as “the village of long life.” Of 990 villages and towns surveyed by the world health organization in Japan, there were ten times more people living beyond the age of 85 in Yuzurihara than anywhere in North America. But longevity alone was not what attracted ABC News to Yuzurihara.

These aged villagers had smooth skin, flexible joints, thick hair and few needed reading glasses. Many older residents of Yuzurihara were still farming their fields into their 80s. These people defied their calendar age. Dr. Toyosuke Komori, the town doctor who wrote five books about Yuzurihara in the 1970s and 80s, noted there had never been a case of skin cancer in the village. He attributed the youthful aging of these people to a low-iron, sticky vegetable-based diet. The

villagers were shorter than other Japanese adults of the same age, which likely means their diet was lacking iron which is a growth factor. Dr. Komori also attributed the youthful appearance of these villagers to a molecule called hyaluronic acid.

I’ve made two previous trips to Japan to explore health and longevity among the Japanese. There is a dramatic



Older resident of Yuzurihara reads Bill's book without reading glasses.

upsurge of centenarians in Japan in the past few years, more than any other country. About two years ago I began to investigate hyaluronic acid (HA), the water-gelling molecule of the human body. Just 1000 milligrams of pure HA can gel 6 quarts of water. When the human body is young, HA is abundant, cushioning joints and nerves and filling space in between cells in the connective tissue. With advancing age HA production by

fibroblast cells dissipates and humans essentially shrivel up, dry out, and begin to look old. The skin wrinkles, the eye and brain shrink, the joint spaces narrow, bone begins to rub on bone, the hair thins, and humans begin to look old. My investigation resulted in a book, How To

Live 100 Years Without Growing Old, which was the first layman's book about HA.

But my earlier trip to Japan was brief and there were so many unanswered questions about the Yuzurihara phenomenon. So I returned to Japan in the summer of 2004 to visit Yuzurihara, this time with a crew of interpreters and cameramen, for an in-depth view.

We were off to a bad start. Our video cameraman missed a connecting flight and was two days late in arriving in Yuzurihara. I left Los Angeles International airport with my still cameraman, Daniel Van Bogelen. We arrived in Tokyo on a Friday and our translators, Tim and Mayu Jensen, greeted us enthusiastically. It took about 3 hours to arrive at our hotel in Uenohara, a few minutes from Yuzurihara.



The next morning we were off to the village of long life at 6:30 AM. After a quick stop for photographs at the etched stone monument at the entrance to Yuzurihara, we visited the fields where crops were being grown in the middle of summer.

Corn, taro root, okra, red onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and potatoes were being grown and harvested. Up to this point there were no surprises. A few people were working in the fields next to their homes on steep slopes where the traditional rice crop could not be grown.

Yuzurihara has in modern times mostly been an isolated village. With the construction of a bridge 12 years ago the village became less remote and now the highway passes through the village. As you enter Yuzurihara there is a marker stone which says "village of long life." Pictures on the wall of the Home Town of Long Life market show that the Emperor of Japan once visited Yuzurihara and took note of this phenomenon.

We began to ask people we met about Yuzurihara's reputation. They told us that Dr. Komori was initially an elementary teacher in Yuzurihara. He later went back to school and became a physician. His research papers and books involved his earlier experiences in Yuzurihara.

His son also became a doctor and helped him in these studies.



Lunch in Yuzurihara consisted of fish from a local stream, millet rice, buckwheat noodles, small whole potatoes with miso paste (tamaji), daikon radish, and other vegetables.

We ate a lunch at the Home Town of Long Life market and cafe where foods typical of the area are prepared. You can see the traditional diet in Yuzurihara is varied. We ate nine different small-portioned dishes at our lunch which included fish from a local stream, boiled potatoes with miso paste (a dish called tamaji), dark purple sweet potato, millet rice, specially prepared daikon radish, buckwheat noodles, red onions, a Japanese-style bun stuffed with azuki bean paste, and a newly introduced sticky vegetable which originated from Egypt and is now grown in Yuzurihara called moloheiya which is known to be rich in iron and calcium. Meat was absent (there is no meat market in Yuzurihara).



We began to mill around outside the Home Town of Long Life cafe where villagers brought their freshly picked vegetables to sell in the co-op market. Still, no obvious surprises. What was in the diet of these villagers that could produce youthful longevity?

Our investigation was suddenly interrupted by an 83-year old villager by the name of Izumi Ishii who drove into the market on his motor scooter to deliver his harvested vegetables. Mr. Ishii is Yuzurihara personified. He captured our attention immediately. His face was always filled with a smile. Here was an octogenarian who drives a motor scooter three miles to the market and still farms



Izumi Ishii, age 83, delivers his freshly harvested vegetables to the co-op market in Yuzurihara by motor scooter.

his fields five to eight hours a day.

Through my interpreters, I chatted with Mr. Ishii and another farmer. I asked them if they knew any of the people who were mentioned in the original ABC News story over three years ago. I showed them photos that were published in my book. One of these seniors peered at the small photos in my book, and without the aid of reading glasses, recognized some of the people in the original

ABC News story. It was then I realized the legends of Yuzurihara are real.

We followed Mr. Ishii to his home and his nearby fields. Earlier in the day this octogenarian had been trimming a 100-year old bonsai tree in his front yard. He was up on a 30-foot ladder to trim the tree. Later, he plowed his vegetable garden with a hoe, doing the work of a man much younger. He seemed indefatigable.

When we were walking back to his house, another curious oldster came out to ask Mr. Ishii what was going on. This was Mr. Mitsutomo Ishii, age 90, who also still works in his field every day, fewer hours in the hot sweltering summer sun, but otherwise puts in a full day's work. He also could visually recognize the pictures in my book, without the aid of reading glasses, of the people in the aforementioned ABC News story. I was in awe of what I was witnessing. Mr. Mitsutomo Ishii had no wrinkles on his face. How could this be?

If there is a secret of youth in Yuzurihara, beyond their low iron diet, it may be their phytoestrogens. These are weak estrogen-like molecules from plants such as soy (the miso paste), and the dark purple sweet potato I found in Yuzurihara. Plant estrogens are known to increase the production of hyaluronic acid in the human body. Notice that when women are pregnant and have high estrogen levels their hair is thick and their skin is very soft. Hyaluronic acid is a water-gelling molecule that is abundant in young children and females who still

produce estrogen. This may explain why these villagers exhibit such smooth skin. Many of the older women had smooth soft hands as if they were decades younger.



Mitsutomo Ishii, age 90 (left) with Izumi Ishii, age 83, residents of Yuzurihara who still farm their fields on a daily basis.

In summary, the secrets of health and longevity exhibited by the people of Yuzurihara involve the following factors:

1. A low-calorie diet with few if any processed foods or refined sugars.
2. A low-iron, vegetable-based diet, obtained fresh from nearby fields. There are no meat markets in Yuzurihara. Plant foods provide iron on an as-needed basis whereas meat provides high absorbable iron regardless of the body's need.



While the residents of Yuzurihara maintain high HA levels in their tissues through their lifelong dietary practices, Bill uses oral hyaluronic acid to replace lost HA. At age 59 he attributes his youthful appearance and flexible joints to oral HA.

3. Sweetfish, a small fish caught from nearby streams, provides a local source of omega-3 oils.
4. Plant estrogens, about 1000th the strength of natural estrogen, are consumed from plants miso (fermented soy

bean curd) and other plants. These estrogen-like molecules help to upregulate the production of hyaluronic acid.

5. Regular physical activity farming their fields in the outdoors. While most American retirees are home watching game shows on TV, these seniors are tilling the soil near their homes. These farmers also get plenty of vitamin D in the summer, which is stored in their liver through the cold winter months.

6. Dairy products are not commonly consumed.

Today Americans attempt to increase hyaluronic acid in their joints by the use of glucosamine supplements. However, glucosamine is only one half of the HA

molecule. HA is two sugar-like molecules (a disaccharide) holding hands (glucosamine + glucuronic acid). Oral HA supplements are now available and they can rapidly replace the hyaluronic acid lost due to advancing age, sun exposure, tobacco use or from other disorders.

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*Bill Sardi in Yuzurihara
with his book
HOW TO LIVE 100 YEARS
WITHOUT GROWING OLD.
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