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Ikigai (生き甲斐) is a Japanese concept that translates to “a reason for being”. It combines *iki* (to live) and *gai* (reason, value, or worth). Essentially, it is what gives your life meaning, joy, and the motivation to continue living and thriving.

During the "Bridging Community Medicine and Innovations in Japan” International Summer Program at Nagoya University, I began to see this philosophy reflected everywhere, in the dedication of physicians caring for patients in their own homes, in the strong sense of community, in the collaboration between healthcare professionals, and in the kindness of the students and faculty who welcomed us international students. Through this experience, I not only gained a deeper understanding of Japan’s healthcare system, especially in comparison to the United States, but also reflected on the pillars of Japanese culture being harmony, respect, and hospitality. My time in Japan has taught me that medicine is not simply about treating disease; it is about finding purpose in serving others and caring for patients with compassion throughout every stage of life.

One of the experiences that had the greatest impact on me was our visit to the Kagayaki Comprehensive Home Healthcare Clinic in Gifu, founded by Dr. Ryoichi Ichihashi. Learning about community medicine practice in a more rural area of Japan and accompanying physicians as they explained their approach to home healthcare showed me a side of medicine that I had never experienced before. I was impressed by how much emphasis was placed on maintaining dignity, independence, and quality of life. Rather than focusing solely on treating illness, the physicians demonstrated how understanding a patient’s family, environment, and personal goals can lead to more compassionate and effective care. It reminded me that medicine extends far beyond the walls of a hospital and caring for a community, especially one that is aging rapidly, requires meeting patients where they are.

Each day of the program, I learned about aspect about Japan's healthcare system and its emphasis on community medicine, preventive care, and caring for an aging population. These discussions encouraged me to reflect on healthcare in the United States and consider how stronger investment in community-based care and home health services could improve patient outcomes. The program challenged me to think beyond the traditional clinical setting and appreciate how healthcare systems can be designed around the needs of entire communities. I also visiting the Dermatology Laboratory at Nagoya University Hospital, I was able to share my experience of working at a dermatology clinic in California. We had a robust discussion about how the mindset of skincare, sun protection, and skin cancer differ in the United States and Japan, further emphasizing how cultural differences impact healthcare.

Outside of medicine, the cultural experiences made this program truly unforgettable. Visiting Gifu, wearing a traditional yukata, taking a river boat tour, and learning about the centuries-old tradition of Ukai fishing gave me a much deeper appreciation for Japanese history and culture. These experiences helped me better understand the communities we were learning from and reminded me that culture plays an important role in shaping healthcare and the relationships between physicians and patients.

While no experience in the United States could match the lessons I learned here in Japan, the most rewarding part of the program was the people I met along the way. The Japanese medical students were incredibly welcoming, kind, and patient, always willing to answer our questions about medical school, daily life, and Japanese culture. Through them, I learned not only about medicine but also about traditions, language, and life in Japan. I also enjoyed meeting medical students from across the country in North Carolina, whose experiences in medical school provided another perspective on medical education, as well as cultural and environmental differences between states. I loved being able to share my love for California and what it was like growing up in such a diverse environment. It was amazing how quickly we were able to connect despite coming from different backgrounds, and our conversations reminded me that medicine is truly a global profession built on collaboration and shared learning.

Looking back, this experience gave me far more than knowledge about another healthcare system. It strengthened my appreciation for community-centered medicine, expanded my understanding of

collaborative patient care, and introduced me to lifelong memories and friendships. As I return to California, I bring home a greater appreciation for the many ways healthcare can be delivered and a renewed motivation to become a compassionate physician who considers not only the diseases patients face, but also the communities and lives they live within. Japan gave me a glimpse of what *ikigai* can look like in medicine, a career rooted not only in science, but also in compassion, community, and lifelong learning. I am sincerely grateful to Nagoya University, Kagayaki Clinic, the faculty members, and the student volunteers for their generosity, hospitality, and dedication to making this program such an enriching experience. It is a lesson I hope to carry with me throughout my journey as a physician.





