



# MARIKO KAKAZU

JAPAN

**Dr. Mariko Kakazu is a Japanese paediatric haematologist-oncologist with 19 years of experience in medicine.** She is dedicated to improving the survival rate of childhood cancer in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

Dr. Kakazu left Japan 7 years ago to serve as a volunteer medical doctor with Japan Heart, a non-profit organization that provides free medical services in under-resourced areas. She played a vital role in establishing Japan Heart Children's Center in Cambodia and has served as the Director of Paediatrics since the inception of this hospital in 2018. The survival rate of childhood cancer in the hospital has improved from under 30% to over 50%. Dr. Kakazu is also committed to training the next generation of medical professionals.

In Cambodia, a large portion of medical professionals disappeared due to the mass atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge regime, leading to the collapse of the healthcare system. Consequently, there is a serious shortage of healthcare workers, making human resource development crucial for establishing a sustainable healthcare system in the country. Recognizing the utmost importance of capacity building in the region, Dr. Kakazu has trained over 30 medical professionals in Cambodia.

***"Nankurunaisa": Do  
the right thing and  
the rest will follow.***

***An Okinawan  
proverb***

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

The first person who has been influential in my career development is my father, who passed away when I was in junior high school due to a brain tumor. He was a hardworking farmer, a loving husband, and a father. His death deeply impacted me and inspired me to dedicate my life to cancer treatment. During medical school, I was assigned to care for a 5-year-old boy with a malignant brain tumor, and he grew fond of me. Unfortunately, he passed away a year later despite intensive treatments, but his courageous battle against cancer greatly motivated me. Throughout this experience, it was the paediatricians who stood by him and supported his family until the end. Inspired by this, I decided to become a paediatric oncologist to help children like him.

The second influential relationship in my career development stems from my hometown, Okinawa, where the fierce World War II ground battle left virtually no hospitals and very few clinics and healthcare staff. Determined to improve the medical situation in Okinawa, I chose to work relentlessly in demanding training hospitals. With the support of my seniors, by the end of my training, the medical disparity between Okinawa and mainland Japan had been significantly reduced. During that time, I had the opportunity to hear a lecture by Ms. Kazuyo Watanabe from the Asia Children's Care League (ACCL), who supports paediatric cancer treatment in Vietnam. I was shocked to learn about the low survival rates of paediatric cancer in developing countries. Motivated to eliminate this medical disparity, I consulted with Ms. Watanabe, conducted on-site inspections, visited various organizations, and eventually got involved in the establishing a hospital to treat paediatric cancer in Cambodia.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

One significant challenge that I faced early in my career was pushing myself too hard to the point of

physical exhaustion. During my time as a medical trainee, I was eager to become a fully-fledged physician and ended up overworking myself, which hindered my growth and left me constantly frustrated. I took the initiative to discuss my concerns with friends and mentors, and I carved out time for self-reflection. Through this process, I gained a better understanding of my current situation, clarified my aspirations, and set specific goals, ultimately regaining a sense of composure.

Another challenge that I encountered was initiating medical activities in Cambodia. Operating in an environment vastly different from Japan, where infrastructure such as electricity, water, and roads was insufficient, required considerable courage, particularly when starting paediatric oncology care. Furthermore, despite the potential for curative treatment for paediatric cancers, some patients' families and local healthcare providers lacked belief in recovery, leading to instances where patients would return home without receiving treatment. Cultural differences with local healthcare providers also posed challenges, with remarks such as "Japanese work culture is crazy!" being directed at me. Nonetheless, I endeavored to improve the environment where possible, respected local cultures, collaborated closely with local healthcare providers to deliver paediatric oncology care, and gradually accumulated successful cases. Presently, we receive nearly 100 paediatric cancer patients annually from within Cambodia, and Cambodian physicians have taken the lead in providing paediatric oncology care. These experiences have reinforced my resilience and adaptability, teaching me the importance of perseverance, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative problem-solving in overcoming challenges within my career.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

What was most helpful to me in balancing my career and other life responsibilities was the support of my family and friends. They understood my desire to improve the survival rate gap for

for paediatric cancer and supported my volunteer work abroad. Especially my mother, who always worried about me pushing myself too hard and getting sick, supported me in maintaining my health and overall well-being. While initially opposed to my volunteering in medical missions in Cambodia, she eventually came around after lengthy discussions and persuasion. Having time to spend with family and friends, even amidst the challenges of work, allowed me to refresh and recharge. Building strong relationships where we support each other has been instrumental in balancing career and personal obligations.

field of paediatric oncology.

## **My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders**

My motto has been the Okinawan proverb 'Nankurunaisa.' It means 'Do the right thing and the rest will follow.' I always keep this in mind, choosing the path of integrity and embracing challenges, even if they are tough. It guides me through life's uncertainties with determination.

My message to younger professionals is the following:

1. Always choose the more challenging path. Opt for challenges that you won't regret, even if you fail. For me, this meant selecting a rigorous training hospital and joining an NGO. Embrace the paths that push you to grow.
2. Find mentors who suit you. Seek mentors who align with your personality, regardless of their role. My mentors include supervisors from my training hospital, senior doctors at the NGO, and Ms. Kazuyo Watanabe from ACCL, whom I often turn to for advice.
3. Treat yourself like your best friend. Prioritize self-care and well-being as you would for a loved one. Avoid overworking and damaging your health. Learn to balance work, family, friends, exercise, and rest. Remember to listen to the voice of your inner best friend and take care of yourself above all.

These principles have guided me through my journey, and I pass them on to those entering the