



A lab technician conducts a test at the Kenya facility.

BOOSTING LIFE EXPECTANCY IN AFRICA: A JAPANESE STARTUP'S COMPASSIONATE PROJECT IN KENYA

In recent years, a major medical testing facility was established in Kenya by a Japanese man whose ultimate goal is to improve healthcare access for people in Africa. The lab can perform 400 types of tests—among the top in Kenya for test volume—including cancer pathology and PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests. The facility has earned the trust of the local community by streamlining the supply of testing reagents and instilling values that are common in Japan, such as orderliness and punctuality.

Connect Afya, a company founded by SHIMADA Yoichi in 2018, has arranged fast and accurate PCR testing in Kenya, facilitating early diagnoses. In 2019, CA Medlynks, a subsidiary of the company, began operating a facility in the country to provide a variety of clinical tests, including PCR testing.

Shimada drew inspiration from what he witnessed in Kenya when he traveled there as a graduate student. He saw patients lined up for hundreds of meters outside a hospital, some waiting all day long without receiving treatment and having to stay overnight in tents, their conditions left untreated.



SHIMADA Yoichi (center) celebrates the opening of his newly established testing lab in Kenya with colleagues.

As a result, Shimada—whose goal is to enable more people worldwide to get more access to medical care—joined a consulting firm after graduate school. There, he learned more about the subject by consulting for medical device manufacturers and drug companies, then went on to start his own clinical testing lab. Speaking on the importance of clinical testing, Shimada said, “Diagnosis must be the first step to the treatment of patients. If you don’t know what’s wrong, you can’t treat them.”

In 2019, even before COVID-19 started to spread, there were hardly any medical institutions in Kenya equipped to conduct PCR tests for detecting viruses and bacteria. Consequently, test reagents were in short supply when needed, with month-long waits for delivery common, as local distributors struggled with limited resources for maintaining adequate inventory. To address this, Shimada negotiated directly with reagent manufacturers to secure a reliable supply line.

Then the pandemic broke out. Shimada’s facility conducted one of the highest numbers of PCR tests in Kenya, providing results in roughly two days and contributing to rapid diagnoses. And by supplying other medical institutions with their stock of reagents, the facility helped boost the number of testing sites nationwide. Between 2020 and 2021, it provided tens of thousands of reagent tests. Reflecting on the

achievement, Shimada remarked, “In times when quick and reliable testing and diagnosis were crucial, our staff’s Japanese-style approach and meticulous follow-ups earned us widespread trust.”

What does “Japanese-style” mean for Shimada? It’s a question of creating patient-centered systems based on respect for time and rules: patients are informed of when to expect their results and are contacted within that timeframe. If delays occur, the patients are notified. These practices, common in Japan, have become standard among the local lab staff.

Ultimately, Shimada’s aim is to extend the average lifespan in Africa. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Africa’s life expectancy in 2021 was 63.6 years—about 12.7 years lower than Europe’s 76.3 years. Shimada sees securing basic healthcare access as a critical challenge. Data from Kenya’s national hospitals show that approximately 64% of all cancer patients are diagnosed at advanced stages, making treatment more difficult. “Cancer gets overlooked in Kenya because people don’t get the proper tests that would lead to early detection,” explained Shimada.

His next step is to collaborate with big international companies and national governments to arrange medical care and testing for more people across Africa. Shimada concluded, “I’ve yet to achieve even one percent of what I still want to accomplish.” ●



Shimada (left) explains a pathology test to colleagues.