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Old rags to vaccine riches

Tokyo company looks to save lives of children through 'vaccines from old clothes' service

BY YOSHIKO OHIRA



J-STORIES - A Tokyo company has developed an innovative service to address a critical issue in developing countries where some 4,000 children a day – or one child every 20 seconds – die from contagious diseases that could be prevented by vaccination.

Nihon Reuse System's **Furugi de Vaccine**, which means "vaccines from old clothes," was launched in 2010 with the aim of collecting unwanted garments to help fund vaccinations. Since then, over 37 million items of used clothing have been collected, helping fund over 4.5 million inoculations.

Users purchase a collection kit, which costs ¥3,300, by phone or online and fill the collection bag provided with unwanted clothing and send it cash on delivery. Each kit sold ensures five polio vaccinations are provided for children in Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos and Vanuatu through the "Japan Committee, Vaccine for the World's Children," a nonprofit organization.

Shiori Suzuki, a spokesperson for the service, told J-Stories that an increasing number of people "want to give away their clothes in the most environmentally friendly way possible." The service provides a convenient way for people to declutter, and help others at the same time. Furthermore, an increased awareness of the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs) also helps make the service popular, she added. Around 70 percent of first-time customers use the service again.

The collection kits are made by workers with disabilities at seven welfare facilities in Japan. According to Suzuki, workers have commented that even though the work is difficult, they feel a sense of achievement and want to challenge themselves further.



A child in Myanmar receives the polio vaccine.



Items that can be collected include accessories and bags, but not underwear or anything wrinkled or stained.



A clothes collection bag with printed design by Kura Mihara.

After being collected, the clothes are shipped to Cambodia, where they are sold in a shop run by the company. Staffers there include people with disabilities and former street children. The company helps them become independent, such as by training them to eventually move on from the sales floor to management.

In Japan, the potential for such recycling is huge. According to the Ministry of the Environment, approximately 130 large truckloads of clothing are thrown away in Japan every day.

This October, Nihon Reuse System also started a corporate service, providing companies with a letter of thanks and certificate that they can use in their PR activities. Suzuki told J-Stories that he wants Furugi de Vaccine to be a way for both individuals and companies to contribute to society.



Staffers at the retail outlet in Cambodia say they are motivated by the thought of helping others.

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