

OPINION

What price Japan's top-notch services?

Overtime limits in the medical, construction and logistics sectors from April will put consumer expectations to the test.



Walter Sim

Japan Correspondent

TOKYO – Dr Shingo Takashima was an aspiring doctor working towards his dream job at a top hospital in Kobe when he died, aged 26, on May 17, 2022.

His mother Junko, 61, found his lifeless body and a farewell note that read: "I'm all to be blamed. I'm so sorry to give you such pain... I'm at my limit and I have no choice."

His suicide, which was judged by manpower authorities as *karoshi* (death by overwork), has become both a cautionary tale and a rallying call for change. Not only had he faced an uncompromising superior and worked 100 days straight without a single day off, but he was also found to have clocked 178, 169 and 207 overtime hours in the prior three months. To give some perspective: these figures are on top of the regular 40-hour work week – eight hours a day, five days a week works out to 160 hours a month.

The unrelenting work pressures, in particular the punishing overtime hours, that pushed Dr Takashima over the brink are a troubling feature of the Japanese healthcare system. A 2022 Japan Doctors' Union survey found that one out of two respondents were concerned about the impact on their own health – an irony as their role is to restore the health of others; three in 10 doctors admitted to having entertained thoughts of death and suicide.

Doctors are joined by construction workers and truck drivers in clocking the longest working hours in Japan where, unsurprisingly, there has been a spate of tragedies across the three professions. The exceptionally smooth running of services for which Japan is renowned – and not just in these three sectors – is facing a reckoning as a result of rising demand and concurrent labour shortages. The practice of



Mrs Junko Takashima, 61, with her doctor son, Dr Shingo Takashima, who died on May 17, 2022. The 26-year-old not only had to face an uncompromising superior and work 100 days straight without a single day off, but he was also found to have clocked 178, 169 and 207 overtime hours in the prior three months. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE TAKASHIMA FAMILY

crushing overtime hours has kept the system going, but even that is hitting the buffers, and one is looming next month.

Overtime limits will kick in for the medical, construction and logistics industries from April, with errant employers facing fines of up to 300,000 yen (\$2,700) or jail of up to six months.

These are part of workplace reforms passed in 2018 following a spate of high-profile *karoshi* deaths.

The limits had first gone into effect in 2019 for large companies, and then in 2020 for small and medium-sized enterprises. The latest phase involving those in the medicine, construction and logistics sectors

is happening only now, given their expected outsized impact on society.

The overtime cap is well-meaning, but questions remain on its effects. At heart, Japan has to ask itself: What price is it prepared to pay for its widely admired first-rate services?

TAKEN FOR GRANTED

That the situation has come to be framed as a "2024 problem" speaks volumes of a country that has taken efficiency for granted: cheap round-the-clock medical care, same-day or next-day deliveries, and a breakneck pace of construction exemplified by how, in one remarkable case, a gaping sinkhole measuring 30m

by 27m by 15m was filled in 48 hours.

Such supposed efficiencies have been built on back-breaking, unlimited overtime.

In medicine, there have long been far too few doctors to go around, and far too much bureaucracy. Japan's 339,623 doctors mean there are 269 physicians per 100,000 people, which is lower than the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) average of 350 doctors per 100,000 people.

In construction, given tight and rigid project timelines, Japan's 4.79 million construction workers often clock overtime.

The entire logistics industry, meanwhile, is built on 870,000

truckers who ply long distances over long hours. Road transport accounts for 90 per cent of freight in Japan.

While the overtime caps come April look good on paper, the government has written into law a series of exceptions that reduce the impact of the changes.

For instance, under the new rules, construction workers can work up to 45 monthly overtime hours, capped at 360 annual overtime hours. However, the limit may be raised or scrapped under "exceptional circumstances", such as natural disasters.

One such exceptional case may be the 2025 Osaka World Expo, whose organisers have sought to be excluded from the law as it is drastically behind schedule despite the opening date of April 13, 2025.

For truck drivers and doctors, the ceiling will be capped at 960 annual overtime hours or an average of 80 monthly overtime hours. But an allowance for more hours is being made for physicians in rural areas, which are already under-served in terms of services.

Will the caps help the people for which it is intended? Some say while it will go some way towards reducing overtime work, it is cutting things fine. The 80-hour monthly limit – setting aside exceptions – is no different from the so-called "*karoshi* line" – the point which Japan has designated as the threshold for death by overwork.

HARDLY A PANACEA

But there is more to the overtime culture. One reason is Japan's stagnant wages.

A low base pay for truck drivers and construction workers incentivises them to work more overtime to earn more money. Said Moody's Analytics senior economist Stefan Angrick: "Overwork creates problems for individuals and society at large, including issues related to health. It also reduces the incentive for companies to invest in technology and automation."

Many workers have said that if companies fail to raise wages accordingly to make up for the reduction in overtime pay, they will seek side hustles to make up for their lost income – which will defeat the very purpose of the law.

A 28-year-old truck driver told public broadcaster NHK in Fukuoka en route to Ishikawa Prefecture – 900km and at least a 10-hour drive away – that his take-home pay was up to 400,000 yen (\$3,600) a month. "I want to earn more, but my working hours will become shorter," he said. "I might use my extra rest time to get another job."

In construction, civil engineering lecturer Kazuyoshi Tateyama of Ritsumeikan University sees the need to change a mindset that has turned work systems into victims of their own success. "Design was systemised, standards were

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Helplines

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1767 (24 hours) / 9151-1767 (24-hour CareText via WhatsApp)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Chat, Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health: 6493-6500/1
- Women's Helpline (Aware): 1800-777-5555 (weekdays, 10am to 6pm)

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for seniors, caregivers): 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180
- Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg
- eC2.sg
- tinklefriend.sg
- chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)



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Online



ANALYSIS Rare unrest

Mass unrest by North Korean workers in China was previously unheard of. But two recent incidents may suggest that some things are unravelling, says Wendy Teo.

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