



## **MY BIZARRE EXPERIENCE VISITING A DOCTOR IN JAPAN FOR THE FIRST TIME**

**By Chris Broad**

This week has been a special week. This week is the second time I've been worryingly ill in my four years of living in Japan. For several days I've been writhing around on the sofa in agony, as if being tasered in the stomach, stumbling back and forth between the sofa and the bathroom, whilst swearing and shaking my hand angrily at the sky.

Fortunately, the ordeal feels as though it's coming to an end and I can return to making the world a much much better place. Throughout this week though, various friends were shocked to learn of my reluctance to visit a Doctor, despite my unpleasant situation, often dismissing them with a causal, "I'll be fine, it's not necessary."

And yet part of me wanted to go to see a Doctor out of curiosity - curiosity as to whether it would be quite as comically bizarre as the last time I paid one a visit.

Two years ago, I was travelling east Japan visiting Kyoto and Hiroshima and whilst staying in a shared dormitory with about 700 people, surprisingly I caught something. This something evolved into the worst sore throat anyone has ever had ever, that made the last few days of my trip around Hiroshima hell. I couldn't swallow food, my throat swelled to the size of Spain and saliva flowed freely from my mouth if I pointed my head at the wrong angle. At night, if I was able to sleep through the pain, I would awake to finding my head in a soggy saliva filled puddle.

After the trip was over, I returned home to rural Yamagata and didn't hesitate to ask my supervisor for a nearby clinic where I could sort out this nightmare once and for all.

They recommended a doctor a few blocks from my apartment, although worryingly they wouldn't be able to accompany me. At the time my Japanese was far from good, having only been learning

for about 18 months and I'd been pretty lucky to be accompanied by my colleagues for most difficult situations such as banking and phone contracts. Alas, today I was on my own.

As I wandered into the clinic I felt the inevitable barrage of stares from the locals, surprised to see a random foreigner from a distant land wander into a rural Japanese clinic. I marched over to the desk to make an impromptu appointment and was promptly given a thousand forms to fill out whilst I sat in the waiting room, including a sheet showing a drawing of a stick figure human body, where I had to circle the appropriate region that was currently affected. I drew a big circle around the neck and for a few brief moments I felt special.

The waiting room had half a dozen patients slumped in it, most of who looked at least 200 years old. The majority were watching the monotonous TV show running in the corner, showing an overly enthusiastic girl slurping a bowl of noodles. It suddenly struck me that I was the only person in the building not wearing a face mask; all the patients and staff wandering in and out of the rooms were hidden behind white masks.

After four years I've still never worn a face mask. Whilst most Japanese people will wear them even if they're slightly ill, I despise the things. First off, it makes communication difficult, in the same way folks wears earphones in public as if to say "don't talk to me." Masks take this to the next level. I don't like the idea of not being able to see someone's face, even if they are riddled with disease. More often than not though they're perfectly fine as masks are often worn for "prevention" purposes.

Consequently wearers are often people who couldn't be bothered to put on makeup when they woke up, or are painfully shy and wish to hide away. One of my best students who I taught for a year remained an illusive figure, only revealing her face three times in the space of the whole year. I could never hear what she was saying in class either.

"BOOROORDO SAN.....BOOOROOOORDO SAN."

It took me a few moments to work out that meant me. An attractive Nurse had arrived to summon me to my audience with the GP - at least she seemed attractive by the upper half of her face that wasn't concealed by the mask.

Now in the UK when you go to see a GP, you go into a small office like room and discuss the problem behind closed doors. There's a large desk that separates you from the GP and there's usually a warm, cosy atmosphere. A brief discussion of the problem is followed by an examination, a further concluding discussion, the tapping of a computer keyboard and the collection of pills a few minutes later, before bouncing off home into the sunset. I expected a similar thing in Japan - and I was wrong.

I was shown into a huge bright room that felt more like an operating theatre, with three young nurses stood smiling and bowing. It was a heavenly sight, quickly broken by the small, slightly chubby elderly Doctor sat on a small chair in the center of the room. He waved me over to a chair position before him, which was almost touching distance from himself.

A wave of shyness swept over me and I felt rather intimidated at the thought of being seen to by four members of staff - all for a sore throat. I smiled awkwardly and nodded hello as I squeezed into the chair before the Doctor. There was no desk between him and I, as I sat facing him trying not to bump my knees against his in the almost uncomfortable amount of space separating us both.

From what I could see the Doctor was relatively old - somewhere in his 60's - and his appearance was well concealed. Wearing all white surgical clothing, he naturally had a face mask concealing his face and best of all, a huge torch mounted to his head, like some kind of coal miner. I found his

appearance to be somewhat disorientating - it felt like meeting a surgeon mid-way through a procedure, as opposed to having a brief consultation with a GP.

He sat in silence for a few moments reading over my forms, where I'd written "nodo ga itai" in rubbish Japanese (I have a sore throat).

"My English, no good!" he barked, slapping the documents down on the table beside him and switching the powerful torch on his head on, dazzling me in the process.

"Let's open mouth!" he demanded, leaning in with his glaring torch to get a closer look.

I opened my mouth as wide as I could, which wasn't particularly wide given the swelling. The Doctor peered in for about five seconds before recoiling in horror.

"Eh? Eh!? Eeee! Sugoi!" he exclaimed, flying back on to his chair and scaring the hell out of me in the process. (*'Sugoi' is Japanese for incredible*).

Again, in the UK, the Doctor might say "wow looks painful", but for the Doctor to actually throw himself back like that, worried the hell out of me.

"Sugoi! Very big throat!" He quickly grabbed a nearby piece of paper and muttered something to one of the Nurses, who disappeared and returned with a box of colouring crayons. With a pencil he began to sketch on the paper, before picking up a red crayon and smothering his drawing in red.

He spent at least 20 seconds mumbling to himself as he worked on his masterpiece, sketching here and there, whilst occasionally throwing in a bit more red crayon. All the while I sat there wondering what the hell was going on. I was really starting to worry now - perhaps it was something worse than just a sore throat or a throat infection. Surely it must be to elicit this kind of panic?

The Doctor finished his red crayon drenched masterpiece and picked it up from the table to show me. "THIS YOUR THROAT!" he yelled ecstatically. "SO BIG THROAT!"

I looked at the terrifying red squiggly thing on the paper and nodded in agreement. It was indeed a big, red throat. He turned to his fleet of Nurses and muttered something beyond my comprehension. They promptly nodded in agreement.

The Nurses motioned for me to follow, so in my confused and worried state I arose and was escorted from the brightly lit operating room away from the Doctor and down a corridor into a narrow dimly lit room with a bed. One of the Nurses motioned for me to pull up my sleeve, simultaneously saying something I couldn't understand. I nodded yes anyway. Another Nurse appeared with an IV drip, which really started to worry me. What the hell was going?

I was asked to lie down on the bed, as one of the three Nurses inserted the drip into the back of my hand, as I watched on in shock at how quickly the situation was progressing. In the space of just three minutes I'd gone from sitting in a waiting room, to having a whirlwind diagnosis in front of four medical staff, watched a Doctor draw my big throat with a red crayon and had my first ever IV drip stuffed into the back of my hand.

The Nurses checked the drip, threw a blanket over me, switched off the lights and walked out the room, closing the door behind them. There I laid, in stunned silence, staring up at the liquid in the bag slowly empty as it ran down the tube into my arm. I would later learn that IV drips are very popular in Japan, and nearly every trip to the Doctor seems to come with an IV drip thrown in.

It's times like this that you wonder how the hell you ended up where you did; lying in a bed far from home, with a drip stuck in your arm in a rural clinic in north Japan. I was still worried that my sore throat was something else far more terrible given the reaction.

After about 20 minutes I drifted off under the warm blanket, only to be rudely awoken by the door being flung open and the Nurses marching back in. Out came the drip and off we went once again, down the corridor for another audience with the greatest artist of our time.

No sooner had I walked in and sat down the Doctor pointed once more at the red crayon drawing. "YOUR THROAT SO VERY BIG." I agreed again that it was indeed a very large throat.

Then came the scary bit as he started muttering a few things to me in Japanese which I struggled to catch, with a few English words thrown in occasionally; "Blah blah blah infection blah blah blah no eating blah blah blah dangerous blah blah blah hospital." From what I gathered it was a warning of what would happen if I didn't get better.

He scribbled on some paper a prescription of various pills and handed it to me, before clapping his hands to signal the closing of proceedings.

"GET BETTER BURODO SAN!"

The Nurses smiled and nodded and I felt a huge sense of relief that my throat wasn't the end of the world after all. I left the clinic confused and disorientated, but the IV drip worked its magic and I felt a burst of energy for the first time all week. Since that day I've often wondered if I should keep a few IV drips at home in the cupboard in case of serious hangovers.

Looking back at this experience I can't help but wonder why I didn't go to the Doctor this week after all. It would have been fun to potentially relive this theatrical experience, safe in the knowledge that it's not a life threatening situation to be seen to by four medical staff, have an IV drip jammed in your arm and to receive a complimentary red crayon drawing at the end of it all. It's just an average trip to the Doctors in Japan.