

Nursing home sets up in-house "bodybuilder team" to instil "security and confidence"

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The Nagoya-based Visionary president Yusuke Niwa said he wanted to change the image of the nursing industry by helping employees improve their appearance and the unique approach was welcomed by those receiving nursing care. - (Photo by Richard A. Brooks / AFP)

NAGOYA: To convey a sense of security and confidence to disabled and elderly residents of a nursing facility in central Japan, its management has resorted to hiring men with muscular bodies.

Kyodo News reports that the nursing home in Tokai region has now set up an in-house "bodybuilder team" and actively recruits athletically-inclined men and women.

The Nagoya-based Visionary president Yusuke Niwa said he wanted to change the image of the nursing industry by helping employees improve their appearance and the unique approach was welcomed by those receiving nursing care.

Visionary, which operates some 20 facilities in Aichi, Gifu and Mie prefectures, had first established an all-male corporate fitness team in 2018 and now also has women staff who are into fitness.

Employees who belong to the team are given two hours in their eight-hour shifts for training, which is recognised as work.

The company bears the costs of gym fees, protein supplements and participation in bodybuilding competitions. Visionary also pays gym fees for employees who are not in the fitness team.

One of the staff, Ryoya Niwa, 27, said Visionary offered the best environment for training and wants to show that nursing carers can also win in competitions where training instructors often rank highly.

Ryoya said he used to work in the construction industry but moved when a job that suited his lifestyle became available.

Apart from expensive gym and competitions fees, he said people at his previous job were sometimes "taken aback" when he would eat "six times a day" while training.

He changed jobs in 2018 after learning that Visionary planned to create a corporate fitness team, which would allow him to achieve an excellent work-training balance. He is now able to eat as much as he wants on the job without anyone batting an eye.

According to the Kyodo News report, the 37-year-old company president is a former hairstylist who decided to try working as a carer after being praised by an elderly person while volunteering at a nursing home.

He then found that nursing facilities were "not keeping up with the times" and badly needed an image change as young people thought of the jobs there as drab and unattractive.

He then founded the company in 2008, believing he could bring about innovation to the industry.

Initially, the company mainly sent carers to people's homes but as the need for workers became more urgent after building new facilities, Niwa saw the need to recruit younger staff.

To do so, he needed something eye-catching, like a team but in an individual activity like fitness, which was relatively inexpensive and easy to incorporate.

"I thought young people would choose a company where employees look good. For me, that image was one of physical strength," said Niwa, who also regularly trained at his local gym at that time.

He said most of the six team members had no prior caring experience but still pushed on as the job was perfect for fitness enthusiasts.

This is because there can be a lot of heavy lifting, hard, physical work, and diligently repeating the same things again.

Soon, Visionary became a topic of conversation on social media due to its muscular carers. Last year, the company wanted to hire 30 recruits but received applications from 300 hopefuls.

Shunsuke Ogata, 23, who lives in a group home for people with disabilities and can hardly move from the neck down due to spinal muscular atrophy, is often lifted by the caretakers when they move him around.

"I feel absolutely safe because my head is held tightly against their burly pecs," Ogata said.

Many of the employees at Visionary come from distant places such as Fukuoka and Okinawa prefectures and were attracted by the company's initiatives.

"We hope to expand nationwide so that more people can work for us," Niwa added.