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**BREAST MAKER
CREATED AFTER
SISTER'S PLEA**
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Maker recovers loss of cancer patients

A sister's plea prompts the start of an artificial breast company.

By **NAOYUKI FUKUDA**

The Asahi Shimbun

NAGOYA—After his sister's refusal to soak in an onsen about 10 years ago, Noriyuki Ikeyama embarked on a project that led to a product that has put smiles on the faces of cancer surgery patients.

The hot spring outing was arranged by the Ikeyama family to mark the sister's five years since her breast cancer surgery in 1994 without a recurrence.

The sister's refusal to disrobe underscored her sense of loss from the surgery. She told her brother that for women, breasts are "as important" as their lives, and asked him to create real-looking artificial breasts that she could wear.

Ikeyama, who was in business to produce dental implants and artificial fingers, set up his own company, URO medical Japan Co., in

2003 to develop what his sister desperately wanted.

The company's sales of its natural-looking, custom-made silicone breasts are now expected to reach 200 million yen (\$2.2 million) a year.

URO medical will open centers in Shanghai and the United States next year.

Although breast conservation treatment is increasingly chosen for cancer surgery, an estimated 300,000 women in Japan have lost their breasts to the disease.

"There must be something to help make up for their sense of loss," Ikeyama, now 52, says.

His sister, now 50, had asked for something to "enable me to go on a two-night, three-day trip to a spa."



Ikeyama



PHOTOS BY NAOYUKI FUKUDA

A worker of URO medical Japan creates a clay mold of a patient's breast. In front is a completed artificial breast.

At that time, ready-made artificial breasts looked fake, and patients had to hold them when taking a bath to prevent displacement, according to company officials.

Ikeyama and his staff members went to great lengths to develop the new artificial breast. They even wore prototypes and repeatedly took baths to test them.

"My wife was shocked, but

I could not afford to feel embarrassed," Ikeyama says.

It took the company three years to create a breast that met his sister's conditions: look and feel natural; fit in a bra; and stay in place in a bath or a shower.

URO medical started to sell them in fiscal 2006.

Sales soared from 20 million yen in the initial year to 80 million yen in fiscal 2008 to 200 million yen projected for fiscal 2009.

Ikeyama says most of his customers shed tears of joy when they are fitted with their new breasts.

At the company's Nagoya Breast Center, specialists called "breast care artists" offer advice to mastectomy patients and create plaster casts.

The elastic artificial breast is created with silicone based on a clay model shaped after the patient's remaining breast, and its hues are carefully adjusted. One artificial breast takes four weeks to complete.

The breast is attached with liquid silicone glue. The boundary with the real skin is difficult to spot, and the artificial breast does not slip

out of place when the wearer moves or takes a bath, staff say.

When the wearer gets slimmer, the silicone inside can be reduced; when she gains weight, it can be increased.

"URO medical's artificial breasts are good because we cannot tell they are artificial," said Takiko Asahi, 61, the leader of a nonprofit group called LOMO (Life of My Own) that supports cancer patients. "They are not inexpensive, but I think the burden to the body would be smaller than breast reconstruction by operation."

Like other makers of order-made breasts, Ikeyama acknowledges that the challenge is bringing down the costs, which start at about 300,000 yen a breast.

With just 15 specialists, the company can produce only 400 to 500 units a year. It is focusing on training, with a goal of employing 300 specialists in four years capable of producing 10,000 artificial breasts annually.

The price can then be reduced to one-third, he says.