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TOM TOM ENGLISH



Japan awash in weird warnings

VOCABULARY

Resent =

To feel bitterness or
indignation

Post-__X__ =

After __X__ e.g. post-
war = after war

Nanny =

A person (usually a
woman) employed to
look after a child at
home

Garment =

An item of clothing

Discussion questions

1. Have you seen any warnings like this?
What were they?
2. What do you think about the tendency to
warn against silly or obvious risks?
3. Do you think Japan is becoming a more
litigious society? Why? Why not?
4. What does the warning label on Japanese
cigarettes say? What do you think about
this warning? Should we remove it?
Change it? Keep it the same?
5. Do you think there are too many
warnings in Japan? Why? Why not?
6. Have you ever had a stupid accident?
Would a warning have helped you?

VOCABULARY

Wacky =

Funny or amusing in a
strange way

Litigious =

Likely to sue

Proliferate =

To increase rapidly in
number; to multiply

Plethora =

A large or excessive
amount of something

“Warning: Holding iced candy in your hands for a long time will result in cold hands.”

“Warning: Toothpaste may spurt. Make sure it doesn’t get into your eye.”

Seriously? Japan is awash in warnings, says Josei Seven (Feb 26). Be careful of this, stay away from that. Harmless, but annoying. Adults **resent** being treated like children. Who can help getting annoyed when reading on an instant soup package, “Warning: Adding hot water will make this hot.”

Japan has been known for this kind of thing for a long time. During the **post**-war U.S. Occupation, General Douglas MacArthur, is said to have described Japan as “a nation of 12-year-olds.” In our own day the expression “**nanny** state” has become familiar. In train stations, on the street, in the media, via loudspeakers, billboards, handwritten signs and product labels, we are forever being told to “be careful.”

And yet, Josei Seven observes, excessive product label warnings originated not in Japan, but in the U.S. Since 1997 there has been an “Annual **Wacky** Warning Labels Contest.” A recent winner was a warning on a clothes iron: “Do not iron **garment** while wearing it.”

Japan is known as an over-protective society, and the U.S. is known as a **litigious** society. People sue each other – and consumers sue product manufacturers – at the drop of a hat. American companies have good reasons to be tense. Josei Seven reminds us of a case 20 years ago when a woman spilled hot coffee on herself and

sued the restaurant for damages. She won, because there had been no warning on the paper cup.

Japanese may be less likely than Americans to **haul** each other into court, but in 1995, a new Product Liability Law was introduced. This law made the manufacturer responsible for damages to the consumer if the product was defective. But what exactly does “defective” mean? Is a paper cup from which hot water can spill defective? If a woman burns her forehead with a hot hair iron, is it the iron’s fault? Better safe than sorry. And the warnings **proliferated**.

And so, of course, have the complaints, Josei Seven learns from the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan. Some of them seem rather surprising. A woman in her 50s said she suffered injuries to her chin while eating a snack biscuit that was harder than she’d expected. A woman in her 80s claimed a hose attached to a kitchen sink faucet shifted suddenly when she turned on the water. This caused her to fall. The hose did in fact come with a warning. The warning said that it could be dangerous to small children. It said nothing about the elderly, so the lady complained.

The center received a **plethora** of similar claims. We don’t know if any of them ended up in court, but even if they didn’t, manufacturers naturally want to protect themselves. Is it possible to cover all bases, to allow for all possibilities? Probably not, but companies are trying harder. And so, “Warning: Be sure to remove all toothpaste from toothbrush after use.” It may get moldy. You never know.