INVITED EDITORIAL

International Expert Symposium in Fukushima, September 2011

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The world knows the story. On 11 March 2011, a magnitude 9 earthquake—one of the largest in recorded history—struck north-eastern Japan. The earthquake triggered a tsunami that severely damaged the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power station (NPS), resulting in multiple meltdowns and hydrogen gas explosions. In the days that followed, radioactive fallout spread throughout the surrounding area.

Radiation. Meltdown. Fallout. These terms inspire real fear for many in today’s world, and Japan is perhaps especially sensitive because of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is due, not only to the connection with weapons technology, but to the fact that experts’ understanding of risk has been so poorly communicated, opening a gap between actual fact and public perception. Following the Fukushima meltdown, the Japanese sensitivity to the problem was particularly apparent, but the national government, which took many effective measures in managing the multi-dimensional disaster, did not live up to public expectations in terms of the relaying of emergency information and countermeasures for dealing with radiation.

The lack of correct, reliable information from the government caused the media to seek out a variety of other sources and broadcast a wide variety of conflicting reports, including many that were untrustworthy, pandered to popular opinion, or directly played upon the fears of the people. The effect was to produce a state in which no one really knew what was happening, and in which people began to suspect that the government was underplaying the danger, simply conducting a cover-up in the interest of fending off a mass panic.

In the face of this flood of conflicting information, the nation and the world in general grew more and more uneasy about the impact of the Fukushima accident.

For this reason, The Nippon Foundation, drawing on its previous work following the Chernobyl accident, decided to bring together the world’s top experts in radiation and health, and to give them an open forum through which they could first gain a comprehensive understanding of what had happened in Fukushima and then discuss the accident from the point of view of health risks, finally producing recommendations on how to proceed. One of the prime purposes of this international symposium was to bring together the world’s leading authorities in such fields as radiology, radiological protection and risk communication, and to thus create a base of reliable information on which decisions could be made, by the government, the press and the citizens themselves. If the scientific consensus was that the danger was more severe than originally thought, then even this would provide a firm starting point from which to proceed. A second purpose was the allaying of public suspicion and mistrust. To this end, it was seen as important to broadcast the proceedings live, through the internet outlet Ustream (www.ustream.tv/recorded/17194336), and that ideas be expressed in language that was easy for anyone to understand.

The experts, who came from such organisations as the ICRP, the IAEA, and WHO, in addition to national institutions such as the National Cancer Institute in the USA, discussed the problem over two days, focusing on six topics: (1) ‘Facts of Fukushima’; (2) ‘Low-level Irradiation and Health, Challenges Involved in Emergency Medicine’; (3) ‘Dose, Dosimetry
and Dose Estimations of Contaminated Areas’; (4) ‘Radiobiology and Radioepidemiology’; (5) ‘Lessons Learned from the Chernobyl Accident’ (including psychological lessons); and (6) ‘Radiation Safety and Guidelines Regarding Health Risks’.

The expertise was widely varied, and participants came both from within Japan and around the world, but a unanimous consensus was reached surprisingly quickly on the final conclusions and recommendations.

These comprised eight points that, among other things, stressed the need for continued monitoring and evaluation of radiation levels, the appropriateness of including the public in a continuing all-prefecture health survey, the dire need for health professionals and scientists to explain to the public, in simple words, the real risks of radiation, the long term commitment of international organisations, and cooperation between the national government and international organizations on a task force regarding the accident. The full document was published in the Journal of Radiological Protection in December 2011 [1].

Following the symposium, in the interest of relaying accurate, easy-to-understand information, all participants took part in a press conference—something that was perhaps equally as important as the discussion of the previous two days. Though an hour had been set aside for the conference, it was decided part-way through that in the interest of satisfying journalists’ queries, the explanations would continue until they ran out of things to ask. This process took an unheard-of three hours. As a result, though, the articles in the newspapers the next day were far more fact-based and easy to understand than they had been previously.

Through this symposium, frontline experts from both within and outside Japan examined the problem of the far-reaching, large-scale spillage of radiation from the Fukushima Dai-ichi NPS, building on their research and experience following the Chernobyl disaster, to provide trustworthy information to responsible government officials, technicians and experts working on the problem, the media and the general public. I have heard that the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the symposium were well received by the government and have been put to good use. It is my sincere hope that this effort will lead to the discovery of the best way to conduct the long fight against radiological effects, and that we can continue develop the cooperative efforts of these scientists and experts so that the people of the affected region can return to their homes as soon as possible.

References


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