

Editorial

What Did Happen At That Disaster

Around 14:46:18 of March 11 of 2011, an incredibly strong earthquake that measured 8.0 on the Richter scale attacked our Tohoku district. The earthquake caused massive tsunami, engulfing and destroying a number of cities and towns on the Pacific coast. Even now, December 2014, the 15,889 persons were killed and 2,594 were missing. In the immediate aftermath, more than 500,000 people abandoned their houses and were forced to flee for refuge. All of express ways, railroads, and arterial roads, and Sendai International Airport, most of ports, power stations including Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant, the Gas Production Plant of Sendai-city Gas Department, and many of the sewage treatment plants – these were all destroyed. Electricity, gas, water supplies, fuel, transportation, telecommunications (information gathering) were disrupted. Not to mention telephones, Internet and cellular phones did not get through. The city functions of Sendai, a mega city with a one million population, were completely shut down. People could scarcely get water and meals required for the day. Not even a single convenience store was open. The reservoirs of heating oil, and gasoline were depleted by quickly. People in the dark without electricity were listening to radio, the only information source, enduring hunger and shivering in the cold. Having strong earthquakes each and every day, everyone was trembling with fear. Tohoku University Hospital secured electricity for three days usage by the in-house power generation system. However, water supply systems, laboratory testing facilities, the radiation room, and the operation room were damaged. All we could do in the condition was to measure hematological blood counts and electrolytes with blood gas analyzers left scattered to the corners of the dialysis room. The operation of all heaters including the ones in the hospital ward was stopped and even the toilet water did not flush. Food for inpatients started running out of stock. As well as the University Hospital, Sendai Medical Center, Sendai City Hospital, and Kosei Nenkin Hospital concurrently suffered a great deal of damage and the medical systems were in the state of crash as a whole.

At this time, tragedies beyond our wildest imaginings were happening from east roads of Hachinohe, Miyako, Kamaishi, Rikuzentakata, Kesenuma, Shizugawa (Minamisanriku-cho), Onagawa, Ishinomaki, Shiogama, Sendai-city to all areas on the ocean side, Natori, Iwanuma, Soma, and Iwaki. Following the earthquake, tsunami waves reaching the highest water level of 38.9m (Miyako-city) travelled through the inland 5-6 kilometers from the coast and ran up Kitakami River to the point of 50km from the sea. Everything was swallowed. The lives of nearly 30,000 people were taken away in a heartbeat. Tidal waves of tsunami cyclically rolled on two or three times, continuously breaking down a gigantic breakwater, a several hundred tons ship, plants, petroleum tanks, and buildings. Ships and tanks were floated and the crashed concrete lumps were drifting around and completely destroyed remaining few structures and other things. Furious fires broke out and flames were rising up on the surface of the water. Coastal plants exploded one by one. Oil leaking from petro tanks and ships covered the water surface and ignited. Several days after the main quake, people were helpless. No one could do anything and no one could tell who evacuated to where and whether who was dead or alive. There were no roads. As telephone calls didn't get through, we here in Sendai had no ways of getting the information about coastal area, Ishinomaki and Kesenuma. The DMA (Disaster Medical Assistance Team) gathered from all over Japan got stuck at an airport and could not move at all. In the coastal areas, the buildings of fire fighters, emergency services, police, and government offices and hospitals were sunken by tsunami waves in a wink, so people could not have a method of calling for help. Helicopters could not approach the people seeking help on the roofs floating here and there on the burning water surface. At five degrees below freezing-point Celsius snow was falling thick and fast and survivors died one after another. Nearly five days since the main quake, the water receded at last and the fires went out after burning down everything. Then, a heap of wreckage, ruined houses, and a countless number of dead bodies - all these were covered with the sludge - were floating in lines of several hundred kilometers on the water surface in north and south along the Pacific coast in Tohoku.

On March 16 when the road toward the central city of Ishinomaki, the senter city of coastal region opened up at last, Tohoku University Hospital dispatched the first group of the medical assistance team. By their reporting, the horrible and devastating situation in the coastal region got through to us here in Sendai as a living reality. Thus the University Hospital immediately decided to send medical team members on a daily basis. On the following day (17th), the author headed for the coastal regionas a member of the team. From the day, members of the Department of Internal Kampo Medicine of Tohoku University Hospital took turns to provide medical assistance; 18th and 19th of March, physician Reina Okitsu who was then a postgraduate student; and 28th March, lecturer Shin Takayamaf acupuncture and moxibustion. And they still continue to provide medical assistance in the devastated sites. Kampo was finely effective for many diseases and symptoms that we experienced and acupuncture was exactly useful to relieve severe stiffness that developed by their lying down on hard floor of the shelters.

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