Physician Shortage in Ishikawa Prefecture

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Ishikawa prefecture is located central north of Japan stretching north to south. It is a medium-sized prefecture with a population of 1.17 million. About half of the population is concentrated around Kanazawa City.

The membership of the Ishikawa Prefectural Medical Association is 1,594.

Impact of the New Post-graduate Medical Training Program

The new postgraduate medical training program initiated in April 2004 brought significant change to community health care in Ishikawa prefecture. There are two medical colleges in this prefecture, Kanazawa University Faculty of Medicine and Kanazawa Medical University, which have sent doctors to the local areas of this prefecture. Previously, 70% of graduates begun their training program at university hospitals and 30% at designated clinical training hospitals. With the launch of the new program, however, more medical residents took the program at clinical training hospitals than at university. This was something unexpected. Furthermore, many local medical residents in the matching system expressed a preference for urban training hospitals, and very few remained at the local medical university.

The number of medical residents in Ishikawa prefecture is also decreasing. From 97 in 2004 to 66 in 2005 and 53 in 2006, the rate of decline is higher than that in other prefectures of Japan. Criticisms related to the problems of the training curriculum and the quality of the preceptors have been observed, but there are also problems uniquely related to the traditional local environment which are difficult to solve. Although the number of medical residents allowed at the Central Prefec-

tural Hospital increased from 4 to 6, more should be permitted to take the program at this hospital to improve community health, given the recent situation where it is difficult to provide enough doctors for the local area from the two colleges. It is necessary to secure more medical residents by participation in joint seminars hosted by the designated clinical training hospitals.

Ishikawa prefecture may be broadly divided into four regions, northern Noto, central Noto, central Ishikawa and Kaga. The average number of doctors per 100,000 population in Japan is 201. It is 146 for northern Noto, 130 for central Noto, 344 for central Ishikawa and 130 for Kaga, showing that doctors are concentrated in central Ishikawa. Under these circumstances, drastic changes in community health care have been observed, especially in northern Noto.

The total number of doctors in northern Noto was 63 in 2003, the year prior to the establishment of the new training program. It declined to 55 in 2006. This resulted from the return of many of the doctors working in the local areas to the university hospitals due to the lack of medical office staff in those hospitals. Although there are

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four general hospitals in this area, there are currently chronic shortages of nurses and doctors, and a hospital there has closed one of its wards of 50 beds. Furthermore, a vicious cycle is being observed in this hospital as many hospital doctors in middle management who are under heavy workloads leave the hospital to open their own clinic to practice medicine.

**Measures to Resolve the Problems**

In this age of continuously declining birthrate and aging population, it is becoming difficult to be sure of receiving sufficient health care whenever you need it. The following measures are some of those being implemented to counter this problem in Ishikawa prefecture:

1. A “Community Health Program” was established, financially supported by Ishikawa prefecture. A total of 20 million yen or about US$166,660 has been budgeted for this 2 year project. Practical training is provided to establish a networking system of the community health resources in northern Noto. Visiting the four general hospitals in Noto in every half-year, we are gathering information to develop a system for the more effective use of limited health resources.

2. Operation of a human resource agency for community health. This agency registers doctors who retire from medical practice and come back to their hometown from other areas and arrange for their reemployment in the clinics in remote areas of this prefecture. One doctor was successfully sent to a hospital in Noto in April 2006.

3. Creation of a physician training program. This is a 4-year program for doctors completing their residency. The first year involves training at the Prefectural Central Hospital, the second and third years consist of working in a local-government hospital in northern Noto and the fourth year consists of training in a tertiary medical institution such as the National Cancer Center. However, there have been no applicants for this program. We are currently reviewing its contents.

4. A major issue is to secure a sufficient number of pediatricians, obstetricians and gynecologists. There is a national shortage of doctors in these specialties. No medical college graduates entered the medical office of the college for pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology in Ishikawa in 2006. Behind this fact is the demanding work involved in these specialty areas and the impact of the declining birthrate. As a countermeasure, a medical scholarship award program was newly created. In this program, a scholarship of up to 2,400,000 yen will be provided to medical students in their fifth and sixth years and to graduate students who are seeking to become pediatricians, obstetricians or gynecologists. The scholarships are awarded for up to 2 years. If these 2 years are spent working as permanent physicians in pediatrics or in obstetrics and gynecology at a local-government hospital, repayment of the scholarship is waived. Even more important than solving the issues of harsh work conditions and financial burden, the biggest problem is that of how to produce medical residents who really want to become specialists in pediatrics, or obstetrics and gynecology.

5. The Ishikawa Medical Association in 2006 set up a Women Doctor’s Committee. The number of women doctors in this prefecture is 40,040 as of 2004, accounting for 16.4% of all doctors. The ratio of successful applicants of women doctors in the national medical examination to the total stands at 33.7% in 2005 and it is expected to reach 50% in the near future. Health care which fully takes into account the activities of women doctors is essential. In comparison with US and Europe, however, there is a steep decline in the number of women working in their thirties in Japan due to marriage, child-bearing and child-care, and the difficulties in balancing work and child-care. Consequently, this may be a large contributor to the shortage of doctors in the fields of pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology which attract more women doctors than other fields. Improvement in the work environment for women doctors to allow them to safely continue to work, including care for sick children with diseases, night child-care and a retraining program for women doctors would be key elements of a solution to the shortage of physicians.