

“Relief Activities Hindered by Anxiety, Fear and Confusion”

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(English Translation by Red Cross Nuclear Disaster Resource Center)

~~~ Yet there were my colleagues working hard as usual ~~~

Soon after we started our medical relief activities in the evacuation center in Soma, we had to leave there because of the nuclear power plant accident. While hearing blaming words from evacuees, we reluctantly moved to Kawamata with feelings of guilt and a sense of fear of the radiation, and then we restarted our relief activities at the evacuation center where many evacuees from the vicinities of the nuclear power plant were evacuating. It was distressful and freezing night. At the evacuation center, the words "radiation exposures" were flying around and the evacuees were in a small panic every time they heard these words. I felt fear. On the other hand, we received lots of appreciation and encouragement from the evacuees, and we really appreciated.

After returning to our hospital, my colleagues gave me a warm welcome at the operating room and I was so encouraged.

Soon after the earthquake I was instructed to perform the relief activities as a member of Relief Team 1. The hospital was in an emergency situation after the unprecedented great disaster. After spending the busy hours in a tense critical situation combined with the endless aftershocks, on the morning of March 12th, we headed to Minamisoma. I had no idea that the nuclear power plant was in such danger and also that there were a number of gigantic, beyond my imagination, tsunami attacks. I left my worries behind, i.e., the aftershocks, power failures, water outages, our house, my family and then departed.

On my way I saw washed away houses, vehicles and boats, and the places looked so terrible and miserable. I recognized the huge size of the disaster caused by the earthquake and the tsunami. I lost all words, worrying about what had happened to the residents there.

I started my first relief activity in the gymnasium in Soma. There were many evacuees from Minamisoma who had escaped the tsunami. Some of them were still in their wet clothes and others had lost their shoes and came there barefoot. However, while the relief activities were finished, the nuclear power plant had exploded and we had no choice but to leave the place. We heard blaming words from the evacuees like “You are abandoning us, aren’t you?” With mixed feelings of guilt and a sense of fear of the radiation; we forced ourselves to move to Kawamata. My heart was nearly broken with sorrow.

Later on after encountering numerous road blocks caused by the landslides we finally managed to arrive at Kawamata. There were many evacuees from the vicinities of the nuclear power plant at the elementary and the middle schools in Kawamata, and we were assigned to perform the relief activities with the Kawamata Hospital as a base. After 11 o'clock in the evening we headed to Kawamata Elementary School Gymnasium with the relief team from the Japanese Red Cross Society Shiga Chapter. We were told by the evacuation center administrator that the number of the evacuees were more than 2,000. I was shocked to see the overflow of evacuees who were filling the entrances, the hallways, the classrooms and the

gymnasium, and there was no space left to even walk around. I had a hard time finding what I should even start my relief activities from. Handing out medicine to a few dozens of patients and saying a few words to them, and getting and giving eye contacts to whoever was there. This was all what I could do. The playground was full of cars and many evacuees were spending the night in their cars. I checked each car around with a flashlight. The temperature was minus 3 degrees Celsius and it was a distressful and freezing night.

On March 13th, I supported the activities in the Kawamata Hospital. Many evacuees who moved to Kawamata came to the hospital. I performed the check-in and medical interviews for over 200 patients. Most of the patients had lost their medicines that had been prescribed before the disaster. I heard many sad stories as if it were a nightmare such as: some of their houses were washed away, their family members were taken away by the tsunami and not seen since, pieces of concrete debris fell over bodies when the nuclear power plants exploded, and I could not stop weeping. Whenever patients were carried in on the stretcher, the voices such as “radiation exposures” or “stay away from them” were heard, and the evacuees got panicked for a while. In the middle of this indescribable fear and uncertainty I felt that time was passing by at extremely slow speed. After finishing the relief activities, I checked my dose of radiation exposure then went home.

On the following day when I came back to the operating room, I saw there were my colleagues working hard as usual, and they welcomed me warmly. I was really encouraged by them. I remember that at the evacuation center there were countless occasions that I was told “Thank you for your effort for taking care of us” or “I know you have a lot of problems of your own so please take care” and they held my hands. Now I feel that I should have been the one to thank them, and here I am with such a valuable experience. I really believe now that there were not only bad things but some good.