

“Remembering the Relief Activities at the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster”

Ikuko Abe
Administrator, Relief Team 6
Medical Affairs Department

(English Translation by Red Cross Nuclear Disaster Resource Center)

~~~ I felt like I was able to do as much as I could ~~~

On March 16th at the evacuation center at Azuma Gymnasium, it was my very first opportunity working as a member of the relief team. At the evacuation center, there were long queues of people who were waiting for the body contamination screenings.

When it was getting dark, we were informed that some patients were on their way from the Futaba Hospital so we started preparing for accepting them. While bringing them into the evacuation center with the help from the Japan Self-Defense Force, I called them out individually, "It is all right now," but most of them couldn't even respond to me. I did all that I could do as a relief team member, while remembering what I was taught in training. When we finished, it was past midnight. Early next morning, my husband brought me a change of clothes and breakfast. I heartily felt how good it was to have a family.

Later on I started practicing dance, and now I occasionally visit care facilities as a volunteer to perform dancing.

On March 11th, 2011 at 2:46 p.m. the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami occurred. A severe and long quake continued, I have never experienced this kind of earthquake before.

I went to the 4th floor of the Pediatric Ward and helped keep doors open with packing tape then waited for the quakes to calm down while holding an intravenous drip table and encouraging the patients in the private rooms.

Thereafter I was spent unusually busy days at the hospital and home while feeling uncertainty and confusion because of the aftershocks and the nuclear power plant accident.

On the morning of March 16th I was called for the relief activities. In the past, female clerks had never been dispatched to the real relief activities even though they were trained. Therefore I was encouraged when I received the call and thought "I will do my best as a member of the Japanese Red Cross Society."

I had attended twice the relief training annually held at the Fukushima Chapter, but since I had never participated in the real field activities I was very nervous in the beginning. However the physician, nurses and administrator gave me the hints and tips as well as their experiences while preparing and on the way to the evacuation center, and these were quite useful with the actual relief activities later on.

The place we did the activities was Azuma Park Gymnasium. It was snowing and very cold on that day, but there were long queues of evacuees at the entrance to the gymnasium, shivering with cold, waiting for the body contamination screenings with dosimeters. Some of the evacuees were wearing only light clothes and sandals and they must have escaped from the tsunami and the nuclear power plants with the only clothes they were wearing.

After greeting with the gymnasium staff, we carried the medical equipment to one of the rooms in the gymnasium then started setting up the first aid center.

Considering the traffic lines of the patients, we determined the layout. We made medical record shelves with some recycled cardboards, remembering “If something is short, substitute it with whatever you can get.”

After setting up the reception desk, the examination room and the treatment room then putting up the banners of “First Aid Center” and “Red Cross”, we asked that an announcement be made to notify that the first aid center was ready. Patients visited us and the majority of the patients were running out of their household medicine. Some patients had upset stomachs, and others had high fever. The medical team visited patients who were unable to come.

In case some medicine ran out at the evacuation center, medicines for a week would be prescribed at the nearest pharmacy by bringing the medicine record book or the left over medicine. However, because gasoline had already run out and vehicles were unable to run, neither picking up nor delivering medicines was possible. The only way to do so was to walk to the pharmacy in the snow.

Before we departed, we were told that about 40 patients would be transferred to the evacuation center from the hospital in Futaba. However, they had not yet arrived as expected.

As it was becoming dark, we finally heard that about 30 patients from the hospital in Futaba would be coming. Everyone was put on buses. They were being laid down over the other patients and some of them might even be already dead. We were also told that the Japan Self-Defense Force team was on its way to the evacuation center. The entire first aid center became a tense atmosphere.

For transporting methods, triage, rooms for patients, order of beds, layout of the treatment tables, medical equipment, materials, medicines, medical records, the treatment flow – the physician, nurses, pharmacist and administrators, all of us worked together to prepare as much as possible for the smooth operation.

After a while the patients started being carried in. At the entrance they were triaged by the physician and tagged accordingly. Then the members of the Japan Self-Defense Force carried them on stretchers with their orderly, swift actions and calls. They were all elderly patients, wrapped around with blankets but they were chilled to the bone. While covering them with an additional layer of blanket and I said to them “Now it is all right,” “It’s been cold, hasn’t it?”, “What is your name?”, but most of them were unable to respond to me. There were some patients with their voices being hardly audible, and others who were able to speak with a loud voice.

For those patients whose names were unknown, we tagged them with the same number both on the bedside intravenous drip table and on the patient themselves, and also put the same number on the medical record cards beside the pillow in order not to mix up the patients.

With a little hope that I might be able to identify their names to write on the medical record cards, I searched for their names on their pajamas, underwear and diapers. Sadly their diapers

and underwear had not been changed for more than three days, what they were wearing were soggy.

The nurses from the Red Cross Kanagawa Chapter relief team were working friendly and swiftly putting intravenous drip needles in the patients who were brought in one by one. I asked one the nurses "Is there anything that I can do to help?" and she replied "Please make the intravenous drip route."

Remembering what I was taught "Do whatever you can do," I made a number of intravenous drip routes carefully with the instruction from the nurses. The patients' faces became gradually lively as the intravenous drip raised their body temperature to normal, and their conditions were getting better. Since they had not been given food or water, soon we started hearing some patients shouting "Water, water please."

After checking with the physician I slowly let them sip water. Then their desperate faces became peaceful. I found a patient breathing painfully with an opening at the front of the neck covered by a bandage. There must have been a tube connected to the opening until the earthquake and the nuclear power plant accident occurred. I was frightened to know the fact that even such a seriously ill patient was forced to be disconnected from the tube and put on the bus. I really felt how terrible the disaster was.

It was already time for the shift change.

It was past midnight. I was so busy working on my duties that I could not realize how many hours had passed. I felt this was indeed the real relief activities at a disaster. I felt like I did my best though it might not have been enough. Other members of the relief team were also working hard to the maximum of their capabilities in their assigned areas.

When I returned to the hospital, I could barely reach the changing room to take off my relief clothing, but soon thereafter I was too tired to even move my body. I was really fatigued and had no energy to go home so I decided to sleep in the changing room.

Early the next morning, my husband brought me a change of clothes and breakfast, and said "Job well done. You must be really tired". I heartily felt how good it is to have a family.

Later on I started practicing dance. This was because I was impressed and moved after I saw a youth singing songs while playing a guitar in the gymnasium hall and encouraging the evacuees and the volunteers cooking and serving warm foods even though it was cold outside. I thought "Likewise I want to be able to do something for the people."

Recently; I occasionally visit care facilities as a volunteer and perform cheerful dances and make the elderly people happy.

From now; I would like to diligently perform my duties as a member of the Japanese Red Cross Society Relief Team, so I will do my best to maintain my health physically and mentally and shape up my skills on the job.