

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster Response (March 11th to 13th, 2011)

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(English Translation by Red Cross Nuclear Disaster Resource Center)

~~~ It was a tough mission, but we can go again with these members. ~~~

On the day the earthquake occurred the Nagaoka Red Cross Hospital dispatched the DMAT and we headed to the Fukushima Medical University Hospital. Later on we continued activities as a Japanese Red Cross relief team. However we had to discontinue the activities in Fukushima due to the nuclear accident and to head to Miyagi. The decision was made for preventing radiation exposure, however, I felt sorry to the affected people and that painful feeling remains in my mind.

On the day the earthquake occurred, we left our hospital as a Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT) two hours after the earthquake and little earlier than our Relief Team 1. Due to poor road conditions, we arrived around midnight at the Fukushima Medical University Hospital. This was the designated DMAT meeting point for us and other groups coming from all over Japan.

Quite a few DMATs were already there, but there was not much demand for DMAT this time. We only transferred a patient with external wounds from Minamisoma to the hospital. Then we continued to be on standby.

The next morning, Japanese Red Cross Medical Center, Yokohama City Minato Red Cross Hospital, and ourselves discontinued as Disaster Medical Assistance Teams and began Japan Red Cross Society (JRCS) relief teams instead. The orders that we received from the JRCS were to set up a first aid center in Shinchi with the Nagoya Red Cross Hospital relief team that would be arriving later.

Shinchi is a coastal town located along the border with Miyagi. Arriving at the town hall of Shinchi, we found the area around the town hall was not much damaged. However, the area between the town hall and the coast, which is about 1km, had been completely flattened only with mud and debris as far as the eye can see.

Led by the Nagaoka Red Cross Hospital relief team, the mayor was told of our arrival and we set up a first aid center in the town hall building. Receiving information that there were about 1,500 evacuees at several evacuation centers in the neighborhood, I organized several medical relief teams from the three Red Cross hospital relief teams and sent them to those centers.

Right before the last team left the town hall, I was told by the town officials confidentially that an explosion might occur at the nuclear power plant. At that time, there were no media reports on the explosion risk and the JRCS did not have any information about it. In the meantime, we were informed that the Nagoya Red Cross Hospital relief team would arrive soon. Since our responsibility as a first response team was to gather information, I dispatched all medical relief teams. However, right after sending off the last team, the JRCS ordered us to discontinue the relief activities and leave the town immediately, which shocked me.

The Nagoya Red Cross Hospital relief team arrived at the town hall soon after I made the decision to leave and I evacuated them right away. We closed down the first aid center which had just been set up in the town hall. There were some members who stayed at the town hall as

liaisons. I asked them to wait in their cars so that they could leave as soon as returning members had this information.

However, the medical relief teams I sent to the evacuation centers seemed to have been too busy to find time to contact us. The explosion occurred while we could not reach them. It was really hard for me to wait for calls from them, alone, in a room of the Shinchu town hall allocated as a first aid center.

I should have considered not to send the members to other sites when there was a lack of information or ordered them to report to me periodically. It eventually turned out that no member was exposed to radiation because the town was more than 30km away from the nuclear power plant. However, some members feared at that time that they might be killed by the explosion like the victims of the atomic bombs. I regret as the leader that I made them have such fear.

The official view of the JRCS on the order was that it was not for the evacuation of the team staff alone but for changing the destination to gather information. But the affected people there would never take it so. I was not able to leave the explanation of the withdrawal to someone else and conveyed it by myself to the mayor on behalf of the relief teams, but I cannot forget how he looked when I told about it.

We cleaned up everything and greeted the town people in a proper manner before leaving there. I thought we did a proper farewell, but I have been told that the people in the town still feel strongly that they were abandoned and the relationship between the town of Shinchu and the Japanese Red Cross Society is strained even now. I believe that the decision to leave the town was necessary for us to avoid a potential radiation exposure, but I still regret this choice. Other members also told me that they still sometimes feel sorry for the withdrawal, because they told the affected people, "We'll visit you again," but they had to leave there.

Since the situation was imminent, I recommended the members of other teams to evacuate as soon as possible, but all the relief teams stayed there until all of the members were back. I am not sure what they did in terms of safety, but I am thankful to their spirit.

Another problem that I regret is that we did not prepare enough daily food, because we wanted to rush in to the affected area as soon as possible.

From our experience of the Mid Niigata Prefecture Earthquake we were expecting to be able to buy some food and other items at convenience stores. We only brought water and things like jelly with us. Before departing for the affected area, each member had only a pastry

The night of the earthquake, we only had a pastry and a rice ball that was kindly provided at the Fukushima Medical University Hospital. On the next day, we ate only cup noodles and a rice ball for dinner at the city hall of Shiroishi. We went without breakfast and lunch. For breakfast on the third day, we had only the jelly that we brought with us. For lunch, the Nagoya Red Cross Hospital relief team kindly shared canned and retort foods (MREs) with us.

During the relief activities, we had only light meals, but most of them were given to us by other people as a courtesy.

There was also a problem in finding shelter, one of the basic elements necessary to live (clothes, foods and shelter). To avoid causing trouble to the affected people at our evacuation site, we spent overnight in our car in the parking lot of Shiroishi City Hall. It was too cold and we slept with the car engine on to keep the heating system running. This consumed already scarce gasoline, made noise, and released emissions into the air. Given that it was a cold season when we were dispatched, we should have prepared something like sleeping bags. I regret that if we had brought cold wear gear, we could have switched off engine when we had to sleep in the car.

The mission was quite tough both physically and mentally. However, the members had been well trained as Disaster Medical Assistance Team members and we were able to work with each other in a friendly atmosphere, even while we were engaged in the relief activities under considerable stress. I think that they were valuable members. We can go again with these members at any time, but we will need more effective preparations. That is the conclusion that I have drawn from the experience this time.