Fukushima: How to address radioactivity long term health problems – "I think it is time for the government to clearly say which areas are no longer livable"

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Academic working in disaster area says radiation screenings, record-keeping needed

An associate professor who has been measuring radiation levels and offering advice to Fukushima Prefecture residents since the nuclear disaster broke out two and a half years ago spoke with the *Mainichi*, saying, "Regular health monitoring, like radiation screenings, are needed for residents."

Below are questions and answers exchanged with Dokkyo Medical University's associate professor of radiation and health management, Shinzo Kimura, 46.

Question: What kind of work are you doing in Fukushima?

Answer: In addition to continually making radiation maps for the city of Nihonmatsu, since November 2011 I have measured residents for radiation exposure as a representative of the city's radiation expert team, and I have also served as a member of an economic recovery committee for the town of Futaba. Since the disaster I have also been doing measurements on my own, and looking into conditions both in and out of the prefecture.

Q: What is important for local residents to do in managing their health?

A: They need to store personal medical information on themselves for looking into the effects of radiation exposure in the future, since the normal length of time that a person's medical records are kept is only five years. In Nihonmatsu, I had residents record their activities for the month of March 2011 as well as the results of thyroid gland and radiation exposure tests in their personal health records. We cannot declare that there are no health problems from residents' radiation exposure or otherwise judge whether there have been effects from the radiation yet, so it is important to have residents observe themselves (in case of future health problems).

Q: What do you think about the difficulties that have hampered the national government's decontamination work?

A: I am sure that the government's long-term goal of annual radiation doses of 1 millisievert or less will be very difficult to achieve for areas with high amounts of contamination, like sub-mountainous areas. Radioactive materials can, depending on the type, travel as far as 100 meters at once if there is nothing to block their progress. If the government wants to do an effective decontamination, it should divide areas by radiation amount and do a widespread decontamination of low-level zones like residential areas.

Q: Another problem with decontamination is what to do with irradiated soil. What do you think about this?

A: I am involved with decontamination work in the Shidamyo area of the city of Iwaki, and in order to reduce radiation levels to the point that farmers can grow crops without worry, we have to remove around 40,000 cubic meters of soil. The mid-term soil storage facility under consideration by the Ministry of the Environment would only hold 28 million cubic meters. If there is nowhere for municipalities to send their contaminated soil, it may end up left in municipalities' temporary storage sites. Technology to compact the volume of the soil will be needed, and I am lending support to the development of that technology.

Q: What thoughts do you have looking back on the past two and a half years?

A: The nuclear disaster's effects have been wide-ranging, from radiation exposure to the collapse of local communities to the separation of family members. If the only damage from the disaster considered is radioactive contamination, not all victims will get support, and divisions will form amongst the disaster victims.

I also feel that as an expert, it is my role to provide residents data like radiation measurements that can help them decide whether to return to their pre-evacuation homes.

Q: The national government has revised the evacuation zones and is encouraging people to return. What are your feelings on that?

A: In a 2007 recommendation, the International Commission on Radiological Protection offers a limit of 1 millisievert of non-natural or medical radiation exposure as a long-term goal. However, for high-radiation spots in the town of Futaba, for example, it would take 165 years for radiation levels to settle down to that level. The disaster evacuees are tired, not knowing when they will be able to return home, and I think it is time for the government to clearly say which areas are no longer livable.

P.S.

* Mainichi Shimbun, September 19, 2013
http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130919p2a00m0na017000c.html