Health and Wellbeing of Fukushima Returnees: What does the Future Hold?

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The threat to the lives and health of those affected by nuclear accidents are not limited to radiation exposure. The threats are multifaceted as well as being short- and long-term. (1) Changes in the health and welfare of affected populations following their return after evacuation remains a crucial public health issue. The Fukushima accident allows us to generate a pioneering policy with respect to the health and wellbeing of returnees, something that has not been done before, even after the Chernobyl disaster.

Evacuation orders around Fukushima have been gradually rescinded, and residents are returning home. Knowledge and understanding about the complex health issues of returnees is improving. Generally, both physical and mental health parameters among returnees are better than those of evacuees. (2) The use of nursing care is lower among returnees than evacuees. However, caution is needed in interpreting these findings for several reasons. First, returnee health parameters are worse than the national average. Second, returning does not necessarily lead to improvement in either mental or physical condition, and it is likely that only individuals in reasonably good health have opted to return. In addition, after years of evacuation predominantly elderly returnees face significant health-threatening difficulties, including environmental changes, lost health infrastructure and access to health services, increased depopulation and loss of family and community support mechanisms. (3, 4)

Despite the progress that has been made, a crucial question remains ‘what should be done to improve future prospects’? While the Hamadori area was affected by the nuclear accident, even before the accident it was already sparsely populated, with a declining population and comparatively inadequate health facilities. What to do in these circumstances further complicates generation of a forward-looking, cost-effective strategy. This presentation will provide an overview of Fukushima’s returnee population health and the future goals we are aiming to achieve.

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REFERENCES