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Disease and regret weigh on atomic-bomb survivors

By NANA O KAMADA

Special to The Japan Times

HIROSHIMA — It is Aug. 6 again, and the 65th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the most destructive act of the 20th century, near the end of World War II. As a medical doctor who has treated atomic-bomb survivors for 48 years, I think it's worthwhile to report on what is happening now with the A-bomb survivors.

In 1962, Hiroshima University Hospital opened a clinic for A-bomb survivors, when I joined its staff as a hematologist. From the 1960s to the 1970s I devoted myself to treating A-bomb survivors with leukemia and cancer, without effective medicine for these diseases. Since 2001 I have been chief director of three nursing homes for 500 A-bomb survivors.

Among the survivors, various types of malignant tumors developed over time because of their exposure to atomic radiation. The occurrence of leukemia started to increase three years after the bombing, thyroid gland cancer eight years after, breast and lung cancer 10 years after, and stomach and colon cancers 15 years after.

So far, it has been confirmed that a total of 13 different types of cancer have clearly increased among survivors. Recently, there have been cases of survivors contracting a second or third type of cancer. For example, one person who was exposed to radiation at a point 410 meters from ground zero at age 11 developed thyroid cancer at 43, bowel cancer at 62 and a brain tumor at 67.

Why has cancer developed in so many survivors and more than one type of cancer among some of them? It is because A-bomb radiation damaged genes in their cells. The cancer incidence of survivors correlates with the amount of radiation they received at the time of exposure. The closer one was to ground zero, the higher has been the incidence of cancer.

Atomic-bomb survivors also suffered great economic losses. All structures within 2 kilometers of ground zero were destroyed or burned down. Many survivors lost their homes, shops and jobs.

In addition, the survivors bear major psychological scars. They regret having failed to rescue others injured at the time, and feel remorse that they survived and are still alive. When they hear that an A-bomb survivor friend has died of cancer, they fear that they might have cancer, too.

Currently there are about 240,000 A-bomb survivors. Fifty-four percent of all A-bomb survivors have passed away. The youngest survivors, age 64, suffered radiation exposure while in the womb. It is estimated that the number of survivors will decrease to several thousand around 2040.

Those exposed to A-bomb radiation in early adolescence or at a younger age have shown a higher rate of cancer than those exposed to the radiation as adults. Most of the survivors living now were adolescents or younger at the time of the blast. Many more cancer patients are expected to emerge — probably 70,000 to 80,000 new cases by 2040.

At present, the average age of A-bomb survivors is 76. Most of these who lost relatives in the atomic bombing now live alone, and the number of such survivors will increase in coming years, as will the number of dementia sufferers. About half of the residents in nursing homes for A-bomb survivors suffer from intermediate or advanced dementia. The number of those in need of medical treatment is rising. On average, an A-bomb survivor is afflicted with more diseases than somebody not exposed to radiation. Many survivors

suffer from compression fractures of the spine, a relatively uncommon affliction among ordinary people.

Under these circumstances, A-bomb survivors long for a world free of nuclear weapons, insisting that they don't want anybody else — regardless of ethnicity, age or gender — to experience their suffering.

Every year, students from about 50 junior and senior high schools around Japan visit Hiroshima's nursing homes for "peace studies." A-bomb survivors who reside there talk about their experiences, telling students, "Never make war, no matter what happens." They neither hold a grudge nor harbor a desire for reprisal against any nation. They earnestly pray for world peace.

At long last, 65 years after the atomic bombings, discussions have gotten under way at the United Nations on how to reduce nuclear weapon stockpiles and clarify the moral issues in using nuclear weapons. But time is limited for A-bomb survivors.

Their prayer is that a "world free of nuclear weapons" will materialize while they are alive.