

Regional Public Health Institutes

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Summary

Regional Public Health Institute (RPHIs) are set up in prefectures and main cities, carrying out inspections and investigations in order to secure stable lives for the people. At present 77 Health Institutes have become members of the Japanese Association of RPHIs. The national organizations related to the service of the RPHIs are the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, National Institute of Health Science, National Institute of Public Health, etc., which have close connections with the RPHIs. The guiding principle of the RPHIs, set up in 1997 by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, specifies that the purposes of the institutes are to effectively promote regional health-care measures for improvement and enhancement of public health, to perform investigative research, test examinations, training/guidance, and to collect, analyze and provide information on public health.

According to the result of an investigation in 2005 covering 75 RPHIs, about 30% were for health only and about 70% were for both health and environment. The RPHIs were initially for health only but, with the flow of the times, their environmental pollution section has expanded or went independent as a separate research institute. The main four services by ratio, namely 1) performing of investigative research, 2) test examination, 3) training/guidance, and 4) collecting, analyzing, and promoting of public health information are reported on average as 2:6:1:1. Over 80% of the RPHIs are carrying out inspections of viral infectious disease, protozoa, bacterial infectious disease, food microorganisms, residual agricultural chemicals in food, contaminants in food, and household goods. In addition, over 50% of the institutes are performing inspections of rickettsia, natural poison, fungus, genetically modified food, allergy-provoking food, clean water, environmental water, drug medicine, and health food. Their investigative research projects are performed in a manner similar to the above, and about 20% of the institutes study the lifestyle-related diseases and analyze health statistics.

The RPHIs were recently required to carry out health-related risk management. Many health-related incidents have occurred in succession since the 90's, such as the sarin gas incident, O-157 incident, arsenic-curry case in Wakayama, dioxin pollution, low-fat milk food poisoning, BSE (mad cow disease), anthrax case, damages by health food, SARS, avian flu, norovirus infection, etc. At the same time, more extensive and higher safety is required such as enforcement of the Infectious Disease Law and the pesticide positive list system, and revision of the Water

Service Law. In order to deal with such problems, it is necessary for the RPHIs to make the most use of its high expertise, to prevent any health crisis, to investigate the causes and to provide assistance to the administrative authorities.

Under the circumstances, a commission of the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry issued an interim report in 2005, in which the RPHIs were required to maintain functional capability as the scientific and technical core of health risk management in the regional and wider area, to secure the capability of inspection, accuracy management, and epidemiological research, to plan construction of a collaboration framework within the area during ordinary times, and to plan enhancement and enlargement of the functional capability of Regional Infectious Disease Surveillance Centers.

To deal with such problems, the survey of actual conditions by the RPHIs was made and a future plan was studied by the Japanese Association of RPHIs. In the six blocs in Japan, cooperation agreements were concluded to provide support for each other whenever any health-related risk should occur. Branch offices of the Organization in such blocs set up various divisions for microbial, physical and chemical science, and hold seminars to share information and to improve the qualifications and abilities of the staff.

The Japanese Association of RPHIs is providing various information through its homepage (<http://www.chieiken.gr.jp>). Such information includes more than 1,000 examples of health-related risk management since the 60's, and a mailing list which can be used by non-members.

The feature articles here are described by the staff of the RPHIs in the Kinki region, concerning their main research & investigation areas such as risk management, infection disease, food-poisoning, food chemistry, drug medicine and water safeness. We hope readers' understanding of the RPHIs will be deepened, and the opportunities for their utilization and shared uses will further be increased.