

Awe-inspiring power of nature

The experiences and activities of the JMA in the wake of the huge disaster—including those of the first Japan Medical Association Teams (JMATs) dispatched to the affected zone and the contribution of JMATs to the response to the nuclear disaster in Fukushima—were reported in “Japan Medical Association Team’s (JMAT) First Call to Action in the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake” in this issue. If necessary, in future issues I will continue to report on the recovery process and ongoing JMA efforts for the benefit of international readers, as the process of recovery from the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and nuclear disaster will be long and arduous.

As it is well-known, Japanese people traditionally have a sympathetic attitude that enables them to adapt to changes in the surrounding natural environment. Traditional villages were built with a small shrine in a plaza surrounded by a forest zone. Festivals were held in the plaza to pray for and celebrate big harvests or successful hunting. Rural life is very much intertwined with reverence for the natural environment, old trees and sacred landscapes. In contrast, in the 20th century humans made gigantic steps forward in science with quantum theory, enabling the control of atomic fire and accordingly the construction of long lasting atomic energy stations. This seems to have made a considerable contribution to the advancement of economic prosperity and the attainment of a highly convenient lifestyle in Japan.

Nature showed us its tremendous hidden power, capable of exceeding any human efforts and safeguards, with the severe earthquakes and extremely high tsunami that struck north-eastern Japan, destroying all the safety nets we humans had constructed. Consequently, the Nos.1–4 reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant sustained terrible damage, exploding spontaneously one after the other.

The scenes of devastation after the earthquake and tsunami were like a surrealistic picture by Salvador Dali. I was also reminded of the Hieronymus Bosch masterpiece, the Garden of Earthly Delights, which I saw in the Museo del Prado in Madrid; this was no longer an allegorical figure but a realistic depiction of our world.

For these past three months I have naturally devoted myself to responding to this terrible situation together with the members of the JMA as the person responsible for disaster medicine. I felt relieved to some extent that the first stage action plan for saving and protecting the lives of refugees seems to be approaching its end. Efforts to protect community healthcare have become visible as the responsible regional medical associations have begun to cover healthcare in the affected areas with the continuous support of JMAT in the style of all Japan non-governmental medical workforces during this time.

A really common conception when I talked with several delegates of medical associations involved in this disaster was that it had been an event that inspired awe of the power of nature. I believe that we humans throughout the world need to think more about our lifestyle, energy policy and coexistence with other humans and organisms in the 21st century and beyond.

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Hieronymus Bosh—The Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1480–1500)