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SURVEY OF PREGNANT WOMEN IN FUKUSHIMA PREFECTURE AND FUTURE ISSUES

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Fukushima prefecture has experienced various impacts following the earthquake and tsunami—not only the damage they caused but also harmful rumors associated with the radiation disaster. Thus, it is considered that problems exist specific to Fukushima prefecture on its way to recovery. The effects of the radiation disaster on pregnant women, in addition to those of the natural disaster, have never been experienced before in the history of mankind; it is an unknown territory. Even now, more than 3.5 years after the earthquake, there is a persistent “anxiety” about low-dose radiation exposure due to high environmental radioactivity compared to normal. According to the Fukushima Prefecture Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, although recently there has been a recovery trend in the number of childbirths together with the recovery of the population in Iwaki district, there was a reduction in the number of childbirths by approximately 20% from 2011 to 2012. However, there are regional discrepancies within Fukushima prefecture; the childbirth rate has not changed in Aizu district, but there is a significant decrease in the number of childbirths in Nakadori.

The following are the current surveys conducted and support offered for pregnant women in Fukushima prefecture: a prefectural health survey by Fukushima prefecture (self-administered survey for pregnant women); the Japan environment and children’s study by Ministry of Environment (for the whole prefecture from October 2012, the three-year entry period completed by the end of March 2014); a prefecture-wide congenital abnormality study by the Japan Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists; and an all-facility complete survey of pregnancy, abortion, and miscarriage by our department.

According to the findings of the prefectural health survey, the percentage of premature births was 4.75% after the earthquake. It was 5.74% in 2012, and the premature birth rate from the 2011 demographic statistics was 5.7%, suggesting that there was almost no change. In addition, the percentage of congenital malformation and abnormality in a single fetus was 2.85% in the whole of Fukushima prefecture after the earthquake and 2.39% in 2012, indicating results similar to the general incidence rate of 3–5%. The study involving 15,149 participants is being conducted for the third year in 2013, starting from December 18th, 2013. There have been 4,633 participants as of the end of February 2014 (response rate: 30.6%).

In the all-facility complete obstetric institution survey of pregnancy, spontaneous abortion, and induced abortion frequency within the prefecture, the total number of pregnancies in Fukushima prefecture decreased by 15%, and the rates of spontaneous abortion and induced abortion are 10–11% and 15–18%, respectively, although some seasonal fluctuation is present, indicating no major change before and after the earthquake.

Based on the study of effects on pregnant women by the earthquake or tsunami, “safety” in scientific terms does not necessarily lead to “peace of mind” regarding the effects of the radiation disaster. Despite lack of objective data, in order to create a “safe” living environment with “peace of mind” as well as to respond to the issue of harmful rumors, it is important to conduct a long-term survey and to accumulate scientific data, which will hopefully result in the provision of a “safe” nurturing environment where one feels “peace of mind” in Fukushima prefecture.