Japan Failed to Hand Out Radiation Pills

Japan Officials Failed to Hand Out Radiation Pills in Quake's Aftermath

By YUKA HAYASHI

TOKYO—Government officials failed to distribute to thousands of people pills that could have minimized radiation risks from the March nuclear accident, government documents show.

The disclosure is the latest evidence of government neglect of emergency procedures in the chaotic days after the disaster, in which an earthquake and tsunami damaged the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

The Fukushima area and some municipalities surrounding the stricken plant had ample stocks of potassium iodide, like most local communities near nuclear reactors around the world. That is a relatively safe compound that can prevent thyroid cancer, the most common serious outcome of a major nuclear accident.

Government disaster manuals require those communities to wait for the central government to give the order before distributing the pills. Though Japan's nuclear-safety experts recommended dispensing pills immediately, Tokyo didn't order pills be given out until five days after the March 11 accident, the documents show.

By then, most of the nearly 100,000 residents evacuated had gone to safer areas and the release of radiation from the plant had subsided from its earlier peaks.

Potassium iodide, which blocks radioactive iodine from entering the thyroid gland, is most effective when taken just before exposure, or within two hours after. It has little effect when administered days after the release of radiation.

In interviews with The Wall Street Journal, several national and local government officials and advisers blamed the delay on a communications breakdown among different government agencies with responsibilities over various aspects of the disaster.

They also cited an abrupt move by the government shortly after the accident, when...
local officials raised sharply the level of radiation exposure that would qualify an individual for iodine pills and other safety measures, such as thorough decontamination.

"Most of our residents had no idea we were supposed to take medication like that," said Juichi Ide, general-affairs chief of Kawauchi Village, located about 20 miles from the plant. "By the time the pills were delivered to our office on the 16th, everyone in the village was gone."

Mr. Ide said the boxes containing pills, also known as KI, for Kawauchi's 3,000 residents still sit in its now-empty village hall.

The towns closest to the plant had pills in stock, and two of them—Futaba and Tomioka—did distribute them to residents without awaiting word from Tokyo. Two communities farther away from the plant, Iwaki and Miharu, handed out KI pills to their residents based on their own decisions. While Iwaki residents were told to hold off until the government gave instructions, those in Miharu took the pills, leading late to a reprimand from prefectural officials.

Japanese radiation experts say results of subsequent tests among Fukushima residents suggest few had been exposed to dosages large enough to raise the risk significantly of developing thyroid disease, even without the medication.

Still, officials from two government bodies—the Nuclear Safety Commission and the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency—are asking why the residents weren't given the pills known to be highly effective, particularly among young children.

A NISA official said the agency is investigating the case.

"It was very clear to us experts what we needed to worry about the most was to provide protection against the risk of thyroid cancer among children," said Gen Suzuki, a physician specializing in radiation research who was summoned to the Nuclear Safety Commission following the March 11 accident as a member of its emergency advisory team. "I had simply assumed local residents had been given potassium iodide."

When he learned recently that wasn't the case, Mr. Suzuki said he was "flabbergasted."

The NSC, a national government-policy advisory body, recently posted on its website a hand-written note dated March 13 as proof that it recommended distribution and ingestion of the pills.

NISA, the main nuclear-regulatory body charged with administering the government's nuclear-disaster headquarters, says the note never came.
Kenji Matsuoka, director of the Nuclear Emergency Preparedness Division at NISA, said the agency was still investigating the case of the lost memo. “We are sorry if the message was lost because of the chaos at the disaster headquarters,” he said. “Our priority at that time was getting people out as quickly as possible.”

Officials in Fukushima prefecture in charge of distributing potassium iodide to local communities say they waited in vain for an instructions from the government’s disaster headquarters, headed by then-Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

The failure to disburse the preventive pills follows other examples of how the Japanese government failed to implement available measures aimed at protecting local residents from the harms of radiation.

Some local officials have accused the government of failing to share the data from its radiation-projection systems, which, they said, resulted in their evacuating residents into highly contaminated areas.

Others blame the authorities for taking weeks before asking some residents outside the initial evacuation zones to evacuate, despite signs of radioactive dangers. The government was widely criticized for declaring food, including beef, to have been safely tested, only to find later that contaminated meat had been sold in grocery stores.

Potassium iodide is an inexpensive and readily available substance that governments and local communities with nuclear reactors typically have on hand. Following the Chernobyl accident in 1986, Poland gave 10.5 million children at least one dose of KI soon after the accident, with very few reports of resulting side effects. In the U.S., Congress passed a law in 2002 promoting distribution of the pills to communities near nuclear plants, but the law hasn’t been implemented.

Japan’s NSC recently posted on its website a document dated March 13 stating Fukushima residents aged 40 or younger should be given potassium iodide, if radiation screening confirmed they received certain levels of exposure. The commission says the document was sent to NISA, the coordinator of disaster response, at 10:46 a.m. that day, two days before the worst day of the accident on March 15, when explosions of two reactors sent thick radioactive plumes across many towns of Fukushima prefecture.

As with most of the correspondence between government officials following the accident, the statement was sent to disaster headquarters in Tokyo by fax, rather than via e-mail. An NSC representative stationed in that office then handed a copy to a NISA official, according to Hideaki Tsuzuku, director of the radiation-protection and accident-management division at the NSC. “It’s not for us to know what kind of judgment was made and action was taken after that,” he said in an interview.

NISA’s Mr. Matsuoka says the agency can’t confirm whether a NISA official received the memo, adding that an investigation into the case continues.

NISA issued an instruction March 16 for residents of towns within 20 kilometers of the plant to take KI pills, nearly four days after the government issued an evacuation order for those same towns.

People close to the situation say the delay may have been caused in part by an abrupt change in the standard used in determining what level of radiation exposure would trigger distribution of the pills. According to official disaster manuals written before the accident, anyone who showed radiation readings of 13,000 counts per minute—a measure for external exposure, as opposed to the more commonly used benchmark of sieverts, which measures health effects—was to be given KI pills, as well as a thorough decontamination, including showering and a change of clothes.

On March 14, Fukushima prefecture raised that cutoff to 100,000 cpm. Once the level was raised, people registering between 13,000 and 100,000 were given wet wipes to clean off the top layer of their clothing. They were not given pills.
During March, roughly 1,000 residents registered readings of 13,000 cpm or higher—102 had readings above 100,000 cpm.

"When they told us they wanted to raise the screening level, we instantly knew we had a serious level of contamination," said Mr. Suzuki, the NSC adviser. "They were implicitly telling us they had more people than they could handle logistically, amid the shortage of water, clothing and manpower."

Naoki Matsuda, a professor of radiation biology at Nagasaki University and an adviser to the Fukushima prefecture government, recalled a meeting with prefectural staff after a day of screening local residents on March 14. They reported gauges on radiation monitors set for 13,000 cpm going off repeatedly. "It was very clear the previous level of 13,000 cpm wouldn't work," Mr. Matsuda wrote in an essay posted on the university's website. "We discussed how the staff should turn off alarm sounds and refrain from wearing protective suits and face masks in order not to fan worries among residents."

The NSC was initially cautious about allowing the higher screening benchmark. On March 14, it issued a statement advising Fukushima to stick to the current level of 13,000 cpm, noting that level is equivalent to a thyroid-gland exposure level at which the International Atomic Energy Agency recommends disbursing KI. The World Health Organization advocates one-tenth of that level for giving the medication to children.

The NSC relented on March 20, after the prefecture used the new benchmark for days. In a statement, the commission noted 100,000 cpm was permissible according to the IAEA's screening standard in the initial stage of a nuclear emergency.

Before the government's March 16 order to disburse the iodine pills, two towns located near the plants, Futaba and Tomioka, with a combined population of 22,500, independently ordered some of their residents to take the pills that were in their stock, according to town officials.

Those in other nearby towns never did so, including Namie, where contamination was later confirmed to be worst among Fukushima communities.

In all, after the government's March 16 order, the prefecture delivered to all communities located within 50 kilometers of the plant enough KI pills and powder to be given to 900,000 people. Most were untouched.
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