

The Situation of University-employed Physicians and the Activities of Fukushima Medical University Medical Association

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Hiromasa OHIRA*¹

Medical universities nowadays are faced with drastic changes in their operating environment, such as the reorganization as corporations, the introduction of the new clinical training scheme, and the increase in student admission capacity. Physicians working for university hospitals bear the responsibility of providing highly advanced care while educating students and residents and conducting leading-edge studies. This places an excessive burden on them. Although the new clinical training scheme that started in 2004 has been fairly successful in guaranteeing the status of residents and enriching training programs, it practically lacks compensation for teaching physicians, and is considered to have caused a situation that is detrimental not only to teaching physicians and residents, but also to patients. As a local university, Fukushima Medical University also bears its share of the impact of such situation. It is feared that young and middle-ranking physicians may become exhausted and lose morale due to the increased burden on individual physicians. There is a deepening sense of crisis that the university hospital may not be able to continue its functioning as the core of medical services in the prefecture. The underlying problem of the short supply of physicians is increasingly expanding to other medical institutions in the prefecture, manifesting itself as a grave social problem affecting the entire prefecture.

Based on this situation, Fukushima Medical University Medical Association was founded in 1993 for the purpose of developing an enabling environment and improving work conditions of university-employed physicians and also providing support to the training of healthcare pro-

fessionals. At present, the membership of the University Medical Association covers 163 of the 302 persons teaching at the School of Medicine. Prior to the establishment of the University Medical Association, physicians working for the university generally considered that the activities of conventional medical associations were focused on political aspects in pursuit of the profit of private practitioners. However, improvement of the work conditions of employed physicians is a vital issue, because employed physicians in fact represent half of the membership of these medical associations. The University Medical Association has also been making requests to the city- and prefecture-level medical associations for the measures to improve the work conditions of employed physicians. On the other hand, city and prefecture medical associations are participating in a wide range of activities related to medical and healthcare issues, such as health screening projects, infection prevention projects, emergency care, disaster management, industrial medicine, and sports medicine. The University Medical Association is currently working in cooperation with these medical associations.

With the radical amendment to the postgraduate training scheme, it has become necessary for the School of Medicine and the University Hospital to collaborate closely and work more effectively in the education and training of healthcare professionals, which conventionally have been conducted under the responsibility of individual clinical departments and organizational divisions. In addition, there is an increasing expectation that the Medical University may provide support to clinicians engaged in community

*1 President, Fukushima Medical University Medical Association, Fukushima, Japan (h-ohira@fmu.ac.jp).

healthcare from the viewpoint of continuing medical education of physicians. The University, in response, has set up the Healthcare Professional Training and Support Center providing various services aiming at human resources development. The University Medical Association also recognizes medical professional training as an important part of its activities and, starting from 2010, enlists two chiefs of subdivisions from the Center for Medical Education and Career Development to take the posts of executive directors of the University Medical Association. There are several new projects planned for the future, starting with a medical seminar organized by the University Medical Association targeted at residents in the prefecture.

The support to female physicians is another important issue for university-employed physicians. The Career Support Center for Women Physicians providing services to the entire prefecture was established in 2010 in our university as part of the Healthcare Revitalization Projects. Female physicians represent 30 percent of university-employed physicians and 10 percent of the membership of the prefectural medical association. The purpose of this Center is to help develop a system for female physicians in the prefecture so that they may continue work without quitting, and those who have to interrupt working because of childbirth, parenting, and long-term care needs may smoothly return to healthcare activities. The center supports the adjustment of work hours responding to the parenting needs of individual workers and prepares return-to-work programs according to their career and wishes. Planned activities include the expansion of nursery services, nursing of sick and convalescent children, and personal counseling for female physicians. The University Medical Association also plans to provide active support to this project.

A noteworthy achievement of the University Medical Association that has been made so far is the establishment of the Fukushima Medical University Hikarigaoka Council, which is also deeply involved in the training of healthcare professionals and support to female physicians. In order to train physicians who have extensive practical capabilities to treat diversified medical conditions, it is necessary that university hospitals and various other medical institutions in the community closely collaborate and cooperate in the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate

clinical trainings. The Hikarigaoka Council works for the purpose of facilitating mutual cooperation of Fukushima Medical University and associated hospitals towards the advancement of medicine and healthcare and training of many proficient clinicians, thereby contributing to the enrichment and improvement of community medicine. It is a key organization for the concrete implementation of the above-mentioned projects for healthcare professional training and support to female physicians. At present, 106 facilities in and out of the prefecture are participating in these projects.

A unique project within the campus is the holding of the Interdisciplinary Meeting for Clinical and Basic Researchers. As an important activity of the University Medical Association, the exchange meetings for researchers in clinical and basic fields, most importantly young physicians, have been organized so that they can freely communicate their visions. Starting from July 2007, five meetings have so far been held featuring the themes of regenerative medicine, cancer, immunity, Alzheimer's disease, and infections. For the clinicians, who tend to lose a researching mind under the pressure of daily practice, the borderless interaction with basic researchers provides an opportunity to renew their awareness. Basic researchers in the University also appreciate the value of this meeting as a precious opportunity for contact with clinicians.

The Board of Directors of the University Medical Association holds monthly meetings, where reports are made by the prefectural medical association and various committees. Various opinions are exchanged at these meetings, focusing on the development of an enabling environment for the University Medical Association members and university-employed physicians as a whole, as well as discussion of healthcare issues. The meeting members also review the editing of the bimonthly Journal of the University Medical Association. The Journal transmits information to university-employed physicians, covering the developments in the University, as well as what is going on in the Japan Medical Association, the prefectural medical association, and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. Jointly with the University Hospital, the Association also organizes the Fukushima Medical University Study Meeting on Oriental Medicine and Fukushima Prefecture Seminar on Gender-based Medicine. It also supports academic lecture meetings, which

are held about 40 times every year.

In conclusion, universities are now in the midst of transformation, and the University Medical Association should assume more active roles. Although we may not quickly find a way to overcome the problems of present reality hindering university-employed physicians from delivering

their primary functions of medical practice, research, and education, it is our hope that the University Medical Association will play a leading role in transmitting the facts of the difficult situation so that many physicians can share information and work toward reform.



Panoramic view of the Fukushima Medical University