

## VOL. 2 Efforts of Public Health Nurses responding to COVID-19

The Japanese Government specified COVID-19 as a Designated Infectious Disease in February 2020 and established countermeasures including hospitalization for patients, the provision of publicly funding healthcare, and surveys on the incidence of infections, the trends and their causes. Public Health Centers had a central role in this response, as did the nurses working there, namely Public Health Nurses\*<sup>1</sup>. There are 469 government-run Health Centers\*<sup>2</sup> in Japan, with around 8,000 Public Health Nurses. In this article, we will introduce the work of the Public Health Nurses at the Tama District Health Center in Tokyo, where the highest number of COVID-19 infections was marked in Japan.

The Tokyo Minamitama Health Center is one of five health centers in the Tama District of Tokyo. It has around 424,000 people under its jurisdiction of the public health administration. There are 67 people working at the center, including 20 Public Health Nurses, only three of whom are responsible for infection control.

As with Health Centers throughout the country, Minamitama Health Center has followed the instructions of the government and set up a 'Returnees and Close Contacts Consultation Center' as a centralized point of contact for COVID-19 enquiries from city residents. However, as Section Head Akane Kasai explains, "from the end of March when infections in Tokyo began to sharply increase, all of our services were overwhelmed and the Public Health Nurses worked all week long until late at night to cope with the demand."

In reality, the work that Public Health Nurses perform in relation to COVID-19 covers many areas. According to Ms. Kasai, Public Health Nurses at Minamitama Health Center provides support for a person with



Ms. Murai and Section Head Akane Kasai

suspected or infected COVID-19, follows the steps below (as of July 2020).

First, the following support is given to the person suspected COVID-19.

- ▽ Triage via telephone at the 'Returnees and Close Contacts Consultation Center'
  - ▽ Coordination/support/transport for consultation at the Returnees and Close Contacts Outpatient Center
  - ▽ Coordination for PCR testing, specimen collection of the PCR test carried out at a hospital/clinic, and specimen transport to the health & safety research center.
- If the test result is positive, once a physician-issued 'Incidence Notification of Novel Coronavirus Infection' is received, the following steps are taken.
- ▽ Coordination/transport to hospital for admission
  - ▽ Active epidemiology survey (the patient and facilities)
  - ▽ Support/consultation for those under home isolation for specific reasons
  - ▽ Transport for inpatients transferring hospitals if the infection becomes more serious
  - ▽ Contact at the time of discharge, and perform the PCR test to confirm negative test result for patients under home isolation (until late May)
  - ▽ Sterilization orders sent to the relevant facilities based on the active epidemiology survey for positive



A specimen taken by a doctor is wrapped in 3 layers by a Public Health Nurse and taken to the lab

cases

▽ Handling of various queries from facilities in preparation for a positive case being identified

▽ Identification of close contacts, contacting those people and requesting their nearest Health Center for a health check-up and PCR test

▽ Treatment consultations and health check-ups for close contacts, and from May 29, PCR tests for all close contacts in line with government instructions

In addition to the above, the work of Public Health Nurses also involves the following: liaison and coordination with relevant organizations and other Health Centers, writing reports to send to government/Tokyo Metropolitan authorities, and, if requested by Quarantine Stations, health check-ups for overseas returnees from areas where COVID-19 is prevalent.

Public Health Nurse Yasuko Murai says that as part of the whole process of treatment and support, Public Health Nurses make great efforts to protect and support infected individuals and their close contacts against prejudice and mental abuse.

Here is one example of the type of incidence that has occurred. When visiting the home of suspected infection to take a sample for a PCR test, while it is essential for Public Health Center staff to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to prevent infection, this

created a problem.

Ms. Murai explains, "There are many residents who do not want their neighbors knowing they are infected. If rumors of an infection spread, they may no longer be able to live in their community, and they may even have to move or change jobs. So, we can't enter their homes wearing our white gear (PPE)."

After some trial and error, residents needing tests were asked to meet at places such as local parks or under bridges away from prying eyes, and the Health Center physician would collect the specimen from them while in their car.

Ms. Murai says, "We waited in our car with our PPE gear on, and the individual would come to the outside of the car. There was less infection risk for us, and it did not attract the attention of neighbors. Time-wise, this was also the most efficient."

Public Health Nurses also have an important role in preventing prejudice and mental abuse in these sorts of communities. As the most accessible public health providers for people living in the community, Public Health Nurses continue their work in the midst of COVID-19 to protect the health of the people.

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Public Health Nurses busy handling arrangements for residents

\*1: Public Health Nurses

'Public Health Nurse' means a person licensed by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare to use the title of Public Health Nurse and provide health guidance as a profession. (Act on Public Health Nurses, Midwives, and Nurses, Article 2)

Public Health Nurses work at government facilities including Health Centers and city/town/village offices, as well as in industry and hospital locations. Those working at city/town/village offices have been on an increasing trend every year. A 2016 survey of work locations showed that the proportion was 58.5% at Health Centers and city/town/village offices, 25.8% at hospitals or clinics, and 5.0% at places of business.

Public Health Nurses, who are responsible for public health and nursing activities, are specialists who have continued to preserve their district nursing work that involves health and nursing in the community. These activities have enabled the discovery of health problems common to their communities, and they are positioned as professionals whose work involves exploring paths to solutions, while placing importance on creating partnerships and collaborating with residents. The work of Public Health Nurses is relied upon for solutions to more diversified and complex health issues, and in recent years in particular, their role has been even more necessary to respond to urgent and difficult issues such as lifestyle diseases and suicide prevention, a need that is continuing to rise.

\*2: Health Center

These centers are run by national or local government bodies for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing the health of local residents. Health Centers and city/town/village health centers have been set up by local governmental bodies throughout Japan in accordance with the Community Health Act.

A Health Center, as a broad, specialist and technical base for disease prevention and improving health, refers to the service in which support is given for the health of local residents. They are established in prefectures, designated cities, core cities and special administrative districts (wards).

City/town/village health centers provide a general level of service directly to local residents, including health consultations, health guidance and health check-ups.