

October 3, 2024

Petition calling for fair and open scientific discussion and management based on that at the Japan Thyroid Association

To the President of the Japan Thyroid Association

The Japan Thyroid Association (JTA) has a tradition of free and open exchange of opinions among its members to pursue the truth about thyroidology. However, since 2018, this tradition has been lost, significantly undermining the association's authority both at home and abroad, and the JTA is in its most critical situation since its establishment in 1958. The causes of this are the following three incidents that occurred under the initiative of the Board of Directors about the thyroid examination in the Fukushima Health Management Survey (hereafter just referred to as the Fukushima thyroid examination).

- 1. The Board of Directors guided the Editorial Board members who published articles critical of the Fukushima thyroid examination in the Journal of the Japan Thyroid Association.**
- 2. The Board of Directors has refused for many years the request by members to hold a public forum to exchange opinions on the Fukushima thyroid examination.**
- 3. The "Thyroid Specialist Guidebook" published by the JTA contains scientifically incorrect explanations about the Fukushima thyroid examination. Based on this book, the examination for the JTA-certified thyroid specialist has been carried out.**

Below are details about each incident and the issues that sprung up from them.

- 1. The Board of Directors guided the Editorial Board members who published articles critical of the Fukushima thyroid examination in the Journal of the Japan Thyroid Association.**

(What happened)

In 2020, a member requested the Editorial Board of the Journal of the Japan Thyroid Association to provide information on thyroid cancer overdiagnosis, and a special topic titled "Considering Overdiagnosis of Thyroid Cancer" was compiled and published in April 2021. This special topic was of high quality, with contributions not only from the JTA members but also from the president of the Japan Epidemiological Association and a world-famous researcher selected as one of Nature's 10.

On June 9, 2021, the Board of Directors issued public information titled "Japan Thyroid Association's position on Special Topic 1, 'Considering Overdiagnosis of Thyroid Cancer,' published in Vol. 12, Issue 1 of the Journal of the Japan Thyroid Association." The information included the following statements:

- 1) The opinions expressed in this special topic represent only a few experts.
- 2) Thyroid experts in Japan have been working on overdiagnosis since before it became a global issue.
- 3) It is a wrong recognition that low-risk thyroid tumors should be left untreated.
- 4) Although the Fukushima thyroid examination is criticized for this special topic, the JTA has consistently supported it.

Shortly afterward, the Board of Directors sent the following notice to the Editorial Board members:

- 1) From now on, the journal's contents will need to be approved by the Board of Directors.
- 2) The next issue of 2021 will contain a special topic planned by the Board of Directors without consulting the Editorial Board.

In October 2021, a special topic planned by the Board of Directors was published. The special topic, "Current Status of the Thyroid Examination in the Fukushima Health Management Survey," contradicted the previous one, stating that there has been no overdiagnosis or overtreatment in the Fukushima thyroid examination and that the thyroid cancers found were cases of very early diagnosis of cancers that would have been discovered in the future. The following reasons were given:

- 1) Diagnosis and therapy are strictly following guidelines.
- 2) Pathological and genetic analyses rule out overdiagnosis.
- 3) There is no evidence to support overdiagnosis or overtreatment.

Following this, with the changes being made to the journal, the Editorial Board was dissolved.

At the councilor meeting in November 2021, a councilor criticized the contents of this special topic, saying, "It is problematic that such scientifically incorrect information is being spread under the leadership of the Board of Directors." In response, the President said, "The contents of the papers are the personal responsibility of the authors of the papers, and the Board of Directors is not responsible for them."

In 2022, opinions from a member of the JTA were presented as "Letters to the Editor" in this journal. The member pointed out that the papers with this special topic lacked evidence and contained logical inconsistencies. However, the Board of Directors did not offer any opinion, and the authors' illogical rebuttal was simply published in the journal as "Responses."

(Issues encountered)

Fear spread among members that they would be punished if they did not follow the intentions of the Board of Directors

It is somewhat difficult to understand why a society's Board of directors would make a publicity statement denying the contents of papers that it itself published as its representative. This unreasonable behavior by the Board of Directors ultimately humiliated the renowned external experts and some JTA members who had been invited to write papers for the Journal of the Japan Thyroid Association. Many members interpreted this response as a punishment from the Board of Directors against the Editorial Board members who provided scientific information unfavorable to the promotion of the Fukushima thyroid examination.

Many members also viewed the subsequent guidance from the Board of Directors to the Editorial Board members as a deliberate attempt to suppress scientific discussion on the Fukushima thyroid examination within the JTA. If the Board of Directors had intended to present a different perspective, they could have simply requested the Editorial Board to compile a new special topic. The members of the Editorial Board at the time would not have rejected such a request.

Perhaps some of the Board members believed that such a democratic approach would prevent opinions favorable to them from being made public by subjecting them to scientific counterarguments. However, this approach is contrary to the fair and open editorial policy of the Journal of the Japan Thyroid Association.

Furthermore, the special topic published by the Board of Directors, using such undemocratic means, contained opinions that were considered scientifically unreasonable and completely different from the views of the United Nations and WHO in recent years, and from views published in major international academic journals such as the Lancet. This has significantly undermined the credibility of the information disseminated by the JTA.

Information disseminated by the Board of Directors contributes to health damage

The start of the Fukushima thyroid examination has led to a widespread misconception among the general public and even among a part of the JTA members that "it is a good thing to perform thyroid ultrasound examinations on asymptomatic children and young people as a cancer screening." Currently, such medical examinations are being carried out nationwide under the name of thyroid screening, and there are confirmed cases of children and young people who have been diagnosed with thyroid cancer as a result of undergoing such an examination. Thyroid cancer diagnosed under such circumstances is highly likely to be overdiagnosed and is considered a health hazard caused by the examination.

However, those who receive such criticism have used the public information and papers published by the JTA to justify their medical practice, claiming that "The JTA says that concerns

about overdiagnosis in thyroid ultrasound examinations are the opinion of a minority and that there is no problem if medical procedures are given by the guidelines." The Board of Directors publicizes that "We have been working on overdiagnosis since before it became a global problem." However, the information provided by the JTA is spreading the harm caused by overdiagnosis.

2. The Board of Directors has refused for many years the request by members to hold a public forum to exchange opinions on the Fukushima thyroid examination.

(What happened)

In 2018, several members requested that the Chairman of the JTA's annual meeting hold an open discussion about the Fukushima thyroid examination. In response, the Chairman replied, "We cannot do this because there are people who are opposed to such a plan, saying that it does not fit the purpose of the JTA."

At the councilor meeting in November 2021, a councilor requested an opportunity to hold an open discussion about the Fukushima thyroid examination. However, no such opportunity was provided after that, so at the councilor meeting in November 2022, a council member questioned the Board's stance. In response, the President replied, "We are not considering it because no director said it should be considered."

In response, the councilor requested, "If you cannot hold an open discussion, we ask you to provide at least an opportunity for everyone to hear from those who are opposed to the Fukushima thyroid examination, such as Sanae Midorikawa, instead of only having members listen to those who are in favor of." However, to date, no such opportunity has been provided.

(Issue encountered)

Criticizing the Fukushima thyroid examination at the JTA has become taboo

The Board's long-standing refusal to openly discuss certain issues involving the JTA is unusual for an academic organization, and has led to a widespread perception among members that criticism of the Fukushima thyroid examination is taboo within the JTA.

3. The "Thyroid Specialist Guidebook" published by the JTA contains scientifically incorrect explanations about the Fukushima thyroid examination. Based on this book, the examination for the JTA-certified thyroid specialist has been carried out.

(What happened)

The JTA published the second revised edition of the Thyroid Specialist Guidebook in 2018. This book is a textbook for the JTA-certified thyroid specialist exam, and the exam questions are based

on this book. It includes a chapter titled "Thyroid Cancer in Children and Young People after the Thyroid Examination in the Fukushima Health Management Survey," which states that there has been no overdiagnosis or overtreatment in the Fukushima Health Management Survey. The reasons given for this include "pathological diagnosis shows that it is not overdiagnosis" and "it is not overdiagnosis because the guidelines are followed." As mentioned above, these claims are at odds with recent international consensus. Specialist exams have been conducted based on this book containing such erroneous information for many years.

(Issue encountered)

Loss of trust in JTA-certified thyroid specialists

Education for thyroid specialists is one of the most important roles of the JTA. Currently, the JTA certifies medical doctors who have been educated that "overdiagnosis has not occurred in Fukushima" and "there will be no health damage from overdiagnosis of thyroid cancer if medical practices are given in accordance with the guidelines" as thyroid specialists. The inclusion of scientifically incorrect information in specialist training due to conflicts of interest among some board members could lead to a loss of public trust in JTA-certified thyroid specialists.

Requests

The current situation in which the Board of Directors is communicating information to members that deviates from international consensus in a top-down manner and stifling discussion is a significant problem for an academic organization. In addition, there has been criticism from both within Japan and overseas that the thyroid examination in the Fukushima Health Management Survey violates the Declaration of Helsinki and threatens the health and human rights of children in Fukushima. We are concerned that the interests of the JTA members will be damaged if the Board of Directors clearly shows its support for it without frankly exchanging opinions with the members.

To improve the current situation, we would like to submit the following six requests to the Board of Directors. They are listed in order of most urgent or easiest to implement. We ask that the Board of Directors consider these requests positively to restore the JTA's stance of pursuing correct science and an environment in which opinions can be freely exchanged, and to restore the trust lost both domestically and internationally.

1. Regarding the "Thyroid Specialist Guidebook," publicize that the items from the Fukushima Health Management Survey will not be included in the specialist examination.

2. Provide an opportunity at annual meetings to hear from members who point out the problems with the Fukushima thyroid examination.
3. Regarding the contents of the special topic entitled “Current status of thyroid examinations in the Fukushima Health Management Survey,” which was published by the Board of Directors ignoring the intention of the editorial board members, the Board must make it clear through public information that these are merely the opinions of individual researchers and that this special topic was not published because the Board of Directors supported the contents.
4. Revise the "Thyroid Specialist Guidebook" to remove the scientifically incorrect statements regarding the Fukushima Health Management Survey.
5. Regular opportunities should be provided at annual meetings where both proponents and opponents of the Fukushima thyroid examination can participate and freely exchange opinions.
6. In public information, it must be made clear that opinions are divided within the JTA as to the benefits and harms of the Fukushima thyroid examination, and that the JTA does not, as a whole, intend to support it.

Councilor : Yoh Hidaka, Sanae Midorikawa, Toru Takano, Ke-ita Tatsumi

Member : Wataru Kameda, Akira Ohtsuru