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Stakeholders' activities, messages, and barriers to passing on the lessons of Minamata Disease for the future: A field visit to Kumamoto Prefecture

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【Introduction】 Minamata Disease (MD) is a pollution-related disease caused by methylmercury wasted by Chisso company. Over 60 years have passed since its official confirmation in May 1956. Individual must have been born before November 1969 to be eligible for compensation claims, resulting in the youngest officially confirmed patient being 53 years old. MD victims are ageing and as of October 2020, out of the 2,998 officially certified MD patients, including Niigata MD, only 457 remain alive (excluding the victims who have not been certified or are unaware of their symptoms). Various MD-related organizations make effort to raise awareness about the issue because MD has complex background. This study aims to learn about MD from a public health perspective.

【Activities】 In February 2023, we participated in a field trip organized by School of Tropical Medicine and Global Health at Nagasaki University to study MD. The students set their objectives in groups and our group was to learn about the activities of stakeholders, messages they want to convey, and barriers hindering the activities to pass on the lessons of MD to the next generation through literature reviews, interviews and discussions with various stakeholders: prefectural and municipal governments, NGOs, victims, teachers, students and a medical doctor.

【Result】 We found that stakeholders are doing a range of activities, such as organizing regular events, lecturing to students, sharing patient stories, organizing visits to relevant sites, and that MD remains an ongoing issue. The main messages they would like to pass on to future generations are different according to the values and target population of each stakeholder, however, commonalities exist among them. The common message is to “provide accurate information and the truth about MD” in order to reduce discrimination and stigma and to use the knowledge and experience gained from MD for future research and other purposes. Many informants expressed a desire to prevent the recurrence of MD anywhere in the world. Additionally, some informants view the MD issue as a “treasure” because people can learn about the complexity of industrial pollution from its history. On the other hand, there are some differences in attitude among stakeholders. For example, one patient is trying to forgive government and Chisso company, but another patient is continuing lawsuit. There are still some major barriers such as shortage of human resources and budgets, and the difficulty of getting the current generation to understand the context of life at that time. Despite the fact that MD is still an ongoing issue, most victims and citizens hesitate to

talk about MD. Stakeholders recommended strengthening the documentation of MD and promoting collaboration among stakeholders in future activities.

【Conclusion】 MD has a complex social background and still affects Minamata City. The complexity of the background also shapes the diversity of the lessons learned from this issue. It is necessary to continue various activities to pass on the lessons about MD to the next generation, ensuring that similar tragedies are not repeated.