

International weekly journal of science

nature

Bureaucracy blights Japan's safety record

Kazuo Inoue

Towa Clinic, 468 Showa, Towa, Hata, Kochi 786-0511, Japan

Reprinted from Nature, Vol. 402, No. 6759, pp. 229 – 230, 18 November 1999

© Macmillan Magazines Ltd., 1999

Bureaucracy blights Japan's safety record

Sir—Your editorial, "Perils of inadequacies in safety regulation", hits on a universal problem in Japan (*Nature* 401, 513; 1999). Besides the nuclear accident and blood products scandal you refer to, there are numerous other examples that testify to the absence of proper management of science and technology in Japan. Large quantities of dioxins are still emitted from refuse incinerators despite global concerns, for example.

Why is Japan unable to control these serious problems? The main reason lies in the machinery of national government, in which the system of authority is administered by bureaucrats. Government offices jettison their veteran officials into high positions in public corporations and related industries to maintain their pyramidal stratification based on a system of seniority. According to the prime minister's office, of 6,843 public corporations under the jurisdiction of the national government, 2,470 had 6,903 ex-bureaucrats as directors in 1997. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. There are many other corporations under the jurisdiction of local government, and numerous private enterprises, that accept retired bureaucrats as executives. The nuclear and pharmaceutical industries are no exception. This practice has meant that respect for irresponsible figures in authority has been cultivated and protected.

The bureaucrats have excellent administrative ability, and industries find it valuable to make connections with them. But these bureaucrats lack expertise in management of unexpected disasters, such as the Tokai nuclear accident. To make matters worse, they lack the expertise needed to regulate the industries for which they are responsible.

Unless this problem is resolved, it will be impossible to establish in Japan effective regulatory bodies, similar to the US Food and Drug Administration. The bureaucrats have a strong hold on major industries. They know that, if new regulatory bodies are established, their grip on industry will loosen irreparably. And industrialists feel they may not survive unless favoured by authority—many companies have made lucrative profits under the status quo.

The first step to resolve this problem may be international acknowledgement of the lack of expertise in safety regulation among Japanese bureaucrats. Responsibility for the management of science and technology should not be limited to one country. We have more powerful science and technology than ever before, and this does not allow any margin for errors. The Tokai accident and other scandals sound a warning that Japan,

which should have high levels of control of science and technology, has made light of safety regulation.

Kazuo Inoue

*Towa Clinic, 468 Showa, Towa, Hata,
Kochi 786-0511, Japan*