A special University of Occupational and Environmental Health in Japan

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The University in general
The University of Occupational and Environmental Health, Japan was established in April 1978 by the Ministry of Labour. The unique purpose of the university is to train occupational health physicians and their co-workers from the undergraduate level. To achieve this aim, all undergraduate students are eligible for a special scholarship if they apply. The amount is sufficient to cover all tuition fees and, in addition, partial support for living expenses.

Those who receive this scholarship are obliged to work at the positions prescribed by the university for a minimum of nine years. If a person fails to clear this obligation, he or she must pay a certain amount back to the fund.

The university established the postgraduate occupational health training course in 1989, which is five years in duration and is designed to fit the required training for the specialist qualification programme by the Japan Society for Occupational Health. The Occupational Health Training Centre was established in April 1991 in the university as the responsible institute for the course. Currently this centre is the only one which offers systematic postgraduate training in occupational health in Japan.

Institute of Industrial Ecological Sciences
The Institute of Industrial Ecological Sciences was founded in the university in April 1986. As its educational activity, the institute is operating the three-month course in fundamental occupational health every year. In addition to offering the educational course by itself, the staff of the institute are assigned to the above-mentioned training centre adjacently and participate in the postgraduate programme. They are also sent to nationwide training courses held by regional medical associations through the centre. Thus the institute is acting as a national resource centre for the training of occupational health specialists.

The institute is composed of 13 departments: Department of Systems Physiology, Mental Health, Clinical Epidemiology, Health Development, Environmental Epidemiology, Environmental Toxicology, Pneumology, Systems and Health, Environmental Oncology, Environmental Health Engineering, Ergonomics, Health Policy and Management and Occupational Health Economics.

The name of the institute originated from an idea that dynamics of industrial structure resembles that of the natural ecology. Cross-sectional interrelations among different industries as well as longitudinal relations of inter- and/or intra-industry are almost similar to those in natural ecology. If the mechanism of a change in such industrial structure can be clarified, one can foresee future changes in the industry. Needs of occupational health would change from time to time, and research and educational needs must reflect those changes. There is thus an attitude of anticipating changes, based on interdisciplinary collaboration among the departments of different specialities.

The three-month course in fundamental occupational health
The three-month course in fundamental occupational health was established in 1984 to provide basic knowledge and techniques necessary for graduates of medical schools to work as occupational health physicians. This course is held each year from April to June, and its curriculum includes lectures in introduction, Special topics related to industrialization, Physiology for occupational health, Industrial safety and human factors engineering, Industrial toxicology, Industrial hygiene, Occupational toxicology, Health care management and administration, Mental health, Occupational epidemiology, and Administrative aspects of industrial safety and health, and offers laboratory studies in small groups.

The participants who complete the course will be exempted from the written national examination and after the oral examination may become qualified occupational health consultants. The course is also an approved
course of the Occupational Health Physician Certification Programme of the Japan Medical Association. Completion of this course is one of the prerequisites to taking the examination of the specialist qualification programme of the Japan Society for Occupational Health. The course was recently designated by the Ministry of Labour as one of the essential training courses for applicants wishing to become occupational health physicians as prescribed by the law.

International course on occupational health

Since 1985, a Group Training Course in Occupational Medicine commissioned by the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) has been offered by the institute. This course is designed for medical doctors who are interested in occupational health, and are engaged in various activities in this field. The course provides basic concepts and a fundamental knowledge of disciplines in order that participants may obtain a broad and systematic view of occupational health. This course is held each year from September to December and 126 trainees from 35 countries had completed this course by 1996. JICA fully supports these trainees for round trip airfare and living expenditures during the course.

Comment

The Occupational and Environmental University in Japan is, as far as I know, the only university in the world so-named. It is a shining example of what is possible in an institution which stresses the importance of research and training in ecological sciences, with particular relationships to health issues.