

## **Chapter 2**

# Outbreak of a “Strange Disease”

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On October 10, 1968, a local evening edition of the Asahi newspaper suddenly reported an epidemic of a “strange disease” characterized by severe acne-like eruptions appearing all over the body, pigmentation of the skin, increased discharge from the eyes, numbness of the limb, pain in the lower back and some other peculiar symptoms, as occurring in Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyushu. According to Mr. Mikio Nishimura, now Senior Staff Writer of Science, Asahi Newspaper Publishing Co., this shocking news was first reported by Mr. Humio Takeda, correspondent, Ohmuta Branch Office of the company (Nishimura, 1972, 1995). The article also suggested the ingestion of a certain commercial brand of rice bran oil (to be called rice oil hereafter) as the possible cause of the disease, since, most of about 40 patients seen in several families in Ohmuta and Kitakyushu cities in the prefecture were found to have used such oil for cooking. The article referred to other important aspects of the epidemic as follows:

Mr. T. K.’s family consisting of parents and three children in Ohmuta City started to use a brand of rice oil in March 1968, expecting its good effect on arteriosclerosis as advertised on TV. However, all began to suffer from an itch in the whole body and acne-like eruptions appearing in the face, breast and back, at the end of April in the same year. Their skin became darkly pigmented and their eyesight was rapidly weakened by increased eye discharge. The symptoms getting worse, they visited the Department of Dermatology, the Kyushu Univeristy Hospital in Fukuoka City. However, the cause of their affection was not made clear. Being at a loss, they visited the Ohmuta Public Health Center for medical consultation, requesting examination of their rice oil which was suspected of containing toxins. After August 1968, more patients with the symptoms and signs similar to those seen in the T. K.s began to visit the Department, and all of them, according to Dr. Masayasu Goto who saw these patients, appeared to have used some rice oil since the spring of the same year. Suspecting the rice oil as the cause of the disease, he and his associates started its examination. With his clinic alone treating more than 30 patients, he also suggested that the epidemic would be widely spread.

The news immediately caused great anxiety among people in Fukuoka Prefecture and its neighbouring areas. It was soon known that the rice oil used by some affected families was a product made by Kanemi Sohko Co. (to be abbreviated as Kanemi) in Kitakyushu City. A great number of people who had used any brand of rice oil rushed to local public health centers for consultation and physical checkup.

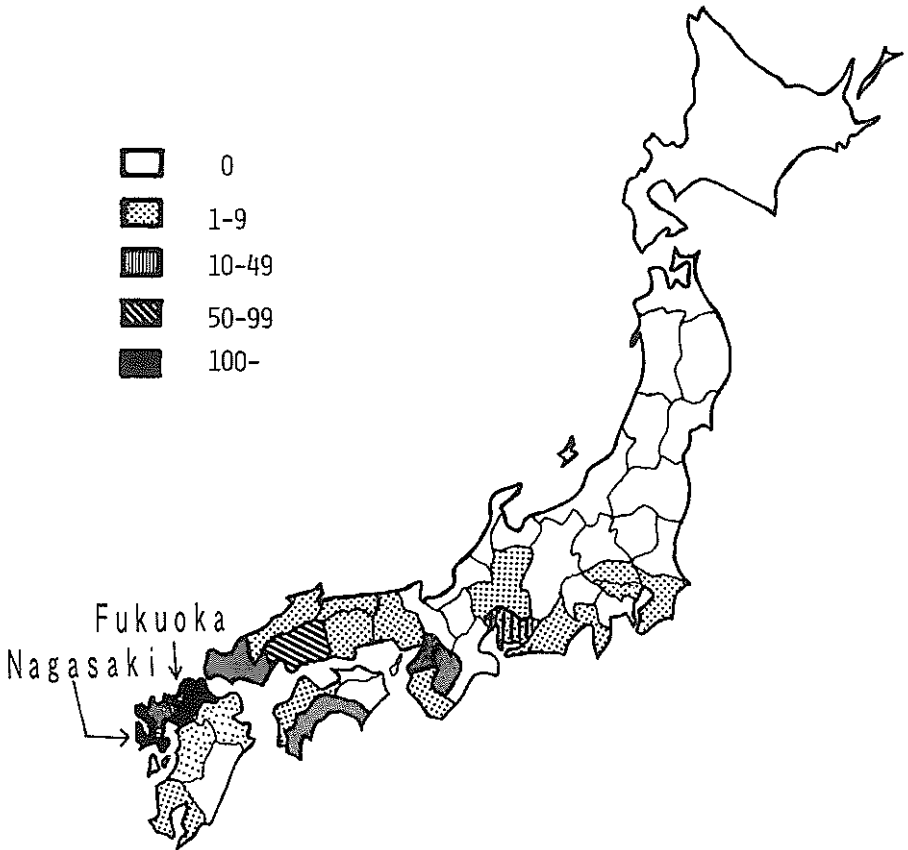


Fig. 2.1. Number of Patients with Yusho by Prefecture as of 1973

Health authorities were thus urgently obliged to take appropriate actions to meet this chaotic situation, after hardly doing anything for the epidemic before it was disclosed by the media. The Public Health Bureau, Kitakyushu City inspected Kanemi and advised them to suspend the shipment of its rice oil products, but the company confident of the safety of its products declined the advice. Meanwhile, it became clear that the epidemic was not restricted to Fukuoka Prefecture, but prevailing in other prefectures in Western Japan (Fig. 2.1). It was also confirmed by health authorities that the epidemic had started as early as in February or March 1968, just as reported by the newspaper.

As regards the cause of the disease, Professor Kentaro Higuchi, chairman of the Department of Dermatology, Kyushu University Hospital, was convinced that some organo-chlorine compound would be involved. He first observed a three-year-old girl affected with an acneiform skin eruption on June 7, 1968, followed by her parents and elder sister similarly affected in early August (Katsuki, 1969). He

saw additional nine patients from three other families during the month. Their dermal signs resembling chloracne led him to consider that the disease would have been caused by exposure to organic chlorine or some agricultural chemicals.

### References

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