Cardiac Transplantation in Japan

Cardiac transplantation is the last therapeutic strategy that can be performed for patients with advanced heart failure. It is not an ideal method because it requires the death of another human, but it is the only one at the present time for preserving life. Organ transplantation is well established in Western countries, whereas in Japan, when the first cardiac transplantation was conducted in 1968, it was criticized severely and there has not been another trial since then, mainly because brain death is not accepted by most Japanese.

Japan is not behind Western countries in either medicine or civilization, although there are qualitative differences in culture between Japan and the West. For example, the worship of nature is generally accepted in Japan, which makes the concept of brain death, when the heart is still beating, unacceptable to many Japanese.

However, the necessity of accepting organ transplantation as a medical treatment began to be discussed in Japan. A government committee was established to consider whether or not brain death could be approved in Japan and the issue attracted public attention as well. In 1991 the Board of Directors of the Japanese Circulation Society offered its opinion, promoting cardiac transplantation, to the committee. The committee's final report on brain death had only a minority against it, and new legislation for organ transplantation from a brain-dead donor became effective on 16 October 1997. However, there was not a brain-dead donor for 19 months until 28 February 1999, when the first cardiac transplantation under the new legislation was performed.

Even in Western countries, there is now a shortage of brain-dead donors. In Japan, it may be a bigger problem, as it has to be overcome mainly by the good faith of the people. Despite the cultural difficulties with cardiac transplantation, 3 cases have been performed in Japan under the new legislation. In this issue of the journal, these 3 cases are described (pp.326–332 and pp.333–339), together with the significance of, and critical issues for, cardiac transplantation in Japan from now on.

Yasuro Sugishita, MD
Editor-in-Chief
Japanese Circulation Journal

Correspondence to Yasuro Sugishita, MD, Director, Tokyo Postal Life Medical Examination Center, 4-7-7 Higashi-ikebukuro Toshima-ku, Tokyo 170-0013, Japan