The Crisis in Radiation Protection

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In 2003 I wrote in this Journal, “the demand for protection is high but the demand for specialists is low... responsibility is being assigned to others.” This resulted in a lack of support for education and research in the various disciplines of radiation protection. Because of this an entire generation of radiation protection experts has been lost.

The demand for specialists appears to be changing with the increasing plans to build new nuclear power facilities to reduce carbon emissions. Also, authorities are beginning to recognize that radiation exposures to staff and patients in some areas of nuclear medicine and radiology are increasing. This is raising awareness of the need for radiation protection experts in the medical area. However, funding for radiation research and for educational programs in the radiation protection specialties worldwide is not adequate. There is great concern that there will not be sufficient specialists and experts in radiation protection to satisfy the requirements for the near future. I pointed out this need in 2003, but little has been done in the past 6 years to address it.

The International Radiation Protection Association (IRPA) is concerned about the availability of qualified radiation protection experts for the near future. One of the areas of focus for IRPA is the promotion of radiation protection as a profession. IRPA has initiated a process to develop guiding principles for a radiation protection culture, an effort that will help to raise awareness of the need for sustaining and developing expertise in radiation protection. Success in bringing a culture of radiation protection into the workplace will emphasize the need to transfer expert knowledge to a new generation of radiation protection professionals.

To be successful IRPA needs the active participation of its Associate Societies. I encourage the Japanese Health Physics Society (JHPS) to take the lead in the Asia Oceanic Region to help IRPA develop these guiding principles and to promote the radiation protection profession in all its aspects, operational, research, university education and continuing education. I request the JHPS to prepare a presentation on this topic, including ideas for a radiation protection culture, for the Associate Societies Forum at the 3rd Asia Oceanic Congress on Radiation Protection (AOCR-3) in Tokyo in May. This should include suggestions of how the other radiation protection societies in the Region can become active in this effort. I would hope that this will promote a lively discussion and develop ideas that can be advanced to the Associate Societies Forum at IRPA 13 in Glasgow in 2012.

Japan is clearly active in promoting advancement in radiation protection science. In September I attended The 5th Asian Regional Conference on the Evolution of the System of Radiological Protection at the National Institute of Radiological Sciences in Chiba. I was impressed by the support in Japan for radiation protection research that was evident at that meeting. One session was devoted to current research in radiation protection and several young scientists gave eloquent reports about their work. It is clear that radiation protection research has high priority in Japan. This seems to me to be a model that Japan can export to other countries to encourage support for increasing research in all areas of radiation protection science.

There are still major challenges to us as radiation protection specialists and, as I stated in 2003, “We can meet these challenges best through interacting with one another and collaborating on solutions.” The JHPS has the opportunity to take a prominent role in this effort. My conclusion today is the same as it was in 2003, “Health Physics is not only an exciting and challenging profession, it is also needed by our society.” Let us continue to work together through organizations such as Asia and Oceanic Association for Radiation Protection (AOARP) and IRPA to advance the radiation protection profession and provide the expertise that is needed in our World.

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