Women Medical Students at the Home Front: Free Summer Clinic by Students of Tokyo Women's Medical Professional School

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Starting in 1930, Tokyo Women's Medical Professional School (now Tokyo Women's Medical University) began a student-led free summer-time clinical session in areas of Tokyo suffering from a shortage of medical professionals. This project, which continued for fifteen years, was a large-scale project, the likes of which were not to be found in other medical universities or colleges. A total number of 240 thousand patients were treated. Much of the treatment took place in the new municipal areas where there was mainly a high demand of emergency treatment. The clinic was open for around two weeks and consisted of medicine, surgery, gynecology, pediatrics, ophthalmology, otolaryngology, dermatology (including urology), a research section and a pharmacy. Doctors and graduates of the School diagnosed the patients and students provided support as of nurses. As for the breakdown of the patients ophthalmology and otolaryngology together claimed about 50% while medicine, dermatology, and pediatrics claimed 40%. The rest were shared by surgery and gynecology. This tendency remained basically unchanged throughout the entire period. Furthermore, the clinic not only diagnosed and treated patients, it held screenings of films on parasites and venereal disease, checked residents for parasites, and conducted research in hygienic epidemiology.

This period was one of expansion for the School and the School was involved in various new developments back to back, such as building new school buildings and the establishing facilities to train nurses and community nurses. The School, which had previously been completely occupied with offering medical education, began to cover a wider scope of activities. Moreover, in Tokyo, the number of unemployed and sick people had surged due to the effects of the Great Kanto Earthquake and the financial crisis and emergency treatment in depressed areas was an important issue at the time. It was, therefore, due to a combination of various political, financial, and education-related circumstances on the part of local authorities, townspeople, and the School that allowed this free clinic project to continue for as long as it did.

Through the project, students aware of the actual conditions in the poorer areas of town, with which they normally had little contact. They came to realize the importance of hygiene education and became conscious of their roles as female doctors. Some of them are said to have made career decisions as a result of their participation in this project. However, the influence of the war on the project grew and ideas such as "duty to one's profession," "defending the home-front," and "national health" promotion under a system of national unity found their way into the project objectives and participants' awareness. The project also provided a symbol as to how women doctors of the time were expected to be. The project allowed women doctors to, on one hand, take on the role of the general doctor, filling in for the male doctors called to service, and on the other hand, work in specialized areas such as preventive medicine and hygienic teaching, which were considered to be areas specifically suited to female doctors.