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Age distribution of childhood thyroid cancer patients in Ukraine after Chernobyl and in Fukushima after the TEPCO-Fukushima Daiichi NPP accident

Mykola D. Tronko¹, Vladimir A. Saenko², Victor M. Shpak¹, Tetiana I. Bogdanova¹, Shinichi Suzuki³, Shunichi Yamashita²⁴⁵

¹State Institution “VP Komisarenko Institute of Endocrinology and Metabolism of the National Academy of Medical Sciences of Ukraine”, 69 Vyshgorodskaya str., Kiev 04114, Ukraine

²Department of Health Risk Control, Atomic Bomb Disease Institute, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki 852-8523, Japan

³Department of Thyroid and Endocrinology, Fukushima Medical University School of Medicine, 1 Hikarigaoka, Fukushima 960-1295, Japan

⁴Department of Radiation Medical Sciences, Atomic Bomb Disease Institute, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki 852-8523, Japan

⁵Radiation Medical Science Center for the Fukushima Health Management Survey, Fukushima Medical University, 1 Hikarigaoka, Fukushima 960-1295, Japan
Mykola D. Tronko, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sci.
State Institution “VP Komisarenko Institute of Endocrinology and Metabolism of the National Academy of Medical Sciences of Ukraine”, 69 Vyshgorodskaya str., Kiev 04114, Ukraine
Tel.: +380-44-430-3694
Fax: +380-44-428-1996
E-mail: iem_admi@bigmir.net

Vladimir A. Saenko, Ph.D.
Department of Health Risk Control, Atomic Bomb Disease Institute, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki 852-8523, Japan
Tel.: +81-(0)95-819-7122
Fax: +81-(0)95-819-7169
E-mail: saenko@nagasaki-u.ac.jp

Victor M. Shpak
State Institution “VP Komisarenko Institute of Endocrinology and Metabolism of the National Academy of Medical Sciences of Ukraine”, 69 Vyshgorodskaya str., Kiev 04114, Ukraine
Tel.: +380-44-430-3694
Fax: +380-44-428-1996
E-mail: v.m.shpak@gmail.com
Tetiana I. Bogdanova, Ph.D., D.Sci.
State Institution “VP Komisarenko Institute of Endocrinology and Metabolism of the National Academy of Medical Sciences of Ukraine”, 69 Vyshgorodskaya str., Kiev 04114, Ukraine
Tel.: +380-44-430-3694
Fax: +380-44-428-1996
E-mail: tutla@mail.ru

Shinichi Suzuki, M.D., Ph.D.
Department of Thyroid and Endocrinology, Fukushima Medical University School of Medicine, 1 Hikarigaoka, Fukushima 960-1295, Japan
Tel.: +81-(0)24-547-1258
Fax: +81-(0)24-548-3249
E-mail: shsuzuki@fmu.ac.jp

Shunichi Yamashita, M.D., Ph.D.
Department of Radiation Medical Sciences, Nagasaki University Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, 1-12-4 Sakamoto, Nagasaki 852-8523, Japan
Tel.: +81-95-819-7116
Fax: +81-95-819-7117
E-mail: shun@nagasaki-u.ac.jp

Running title: Thyroid cancer after Chernobyl and Fukushima

Key words: thyroid cancer, radiation, Chernobyl, Fukushima
The epidemic of thyroid cancer among children exposed to radiation is a worldwide
known health consequence of the Chernobyl accident, which took place on April 26, 1986.
In Ukraine, a sharp increase in the incidence of thyroid cancer was observed since 1990, and
had been preceded by a so-called period of latency during which no significant raise in
baseline incidence was registered (1). Current interpretation of the cases in young patients
detected during the period of latency in Chernobyl areas is that they were not due to
radiation.

A large-scale nuclear accident occurred at the TEPCO-Fukushima Daïichi Nuclear
Power plant in March 2011. In response to the disaster, Fukushima Prefecture launched the
Fukushima Health Management Survey to investigate long-term low-dose radiation health
effects. The Thyroid Ultrasound Examination Program, a component of the Survey, was
started in October 2011 aiming at performing ultrasound examination of the neck in some
360,000 Fukushima Prefecture residents aged up to 18 years in March 2011. As of February
2014, the Program covered nearly 80% of the target population and reported 75 cases
suspicous for malignancy or malignant (2). Note that these findings were obtained using
highly sensitive ultrasound equipment in the course of an unprecedented mass screening,
which unavoidably increases incidence rate (3); the screening is being performed for the first
time in this geographic area, and in a screening-naïve population. Thirty-four patients have
been operated; pathological diagnoses include 1 benign tumor, 1 suspicious for poorly
differentiated thyroid carcinoma and 32 papillary thyroid carcinomas. Such a high
prevalence has not been anticipated, and is widely discussed by the specialists and the public,
sometimes expressing concerns about possible relationship to radiation exposure.

In the Figure 1, we plotted the distribution of thyroid cancer patients aged up to 18
years at accident by their age at exposure diagnosed in Ukraine during the period of latency
and first years after it (1), and of those diagnosed in Fukushima (2). There is a striking
similarity between the profiles of patients diagnosed during the period of latency after Chernobyl in Ukraine and currently in Fukushima. In contrast, patients diagnosed in Ukraine after the period of latency, when radiation-induced tumors started to realize, display principally different age pattern. A large number of individuals exposed at the age below five years old, who are at the highest risk for radiation-induced thyroid cancer, have been seen. No such patients have been diagnosed in Fukushima so far.

In our opinion, if thyroid cancers in Fukushima were due to radiation, more cases in exposed at pre-school age children would have been expected. In addition, thyroid doses in Fukushima are markedly lower than those in Chernobyl areas (4). Further analysis will be necessary with respect to the thyroid cancer cases that may appear in the coming years, once the period of latency has passed. Particular attention should be paid to thyroid dose reconstruction, age at exposure and diagnosis, tumor morphology (the solid growth pattern was frequently observed in childhood papillary thyroid carcinomas that developed after the short period of latency in Chernobyl), and whether there will be “harvesting effect”, which is a spike in cases after introduction of screening.
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AUTHOR DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No competing financial interests exist.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Vladimir Saenko, Ph.D.
Department of Health Risk Control, Nagasaki University Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, 1-12-4 Sakamoto, Nagasaki 852-8523, Japan
Tel.: +81-(0)95-819-7122
Fax: +81-(0)95-819-7169
E-mail: saenko@nagasaki-u.ac.jp
References


Fig. 1
FIGURE LEGEND

Figure 1. Distribution of thyroid cancer patients by age at exposure diagnosed during the period of latency (1986-1989) and after it (1990-1993) in Ukraine, and patients with verified or suspicious thyroid cancer in Fukushima diagnosed during 2011-2013. Numbers above the bars correspond to the number of patients of given age at exposure. Note that comparison of the absolute number of cases between the two regions of radiological accidents would be inappropriate because of differences in population size and screening protocols, in particular a more systematic approach, higher population coverage and advanced ultrasound equipment in Fukushima.