

50 years on, Niigata Minamata sufferers still seeking relief - The Japan News

By Hirotaka Fukaya / Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer May 31 marked 50 years since official recognition was given to sufferers of Niigata Minamata disease (see below), one of the four major pollution-related diseases in Japan.

As in the case of Minamata disease in Kumamoto Prefecture, people who do not meet the government criteria have been pressing the state to take responsibility in lawsuits that continue to this day.

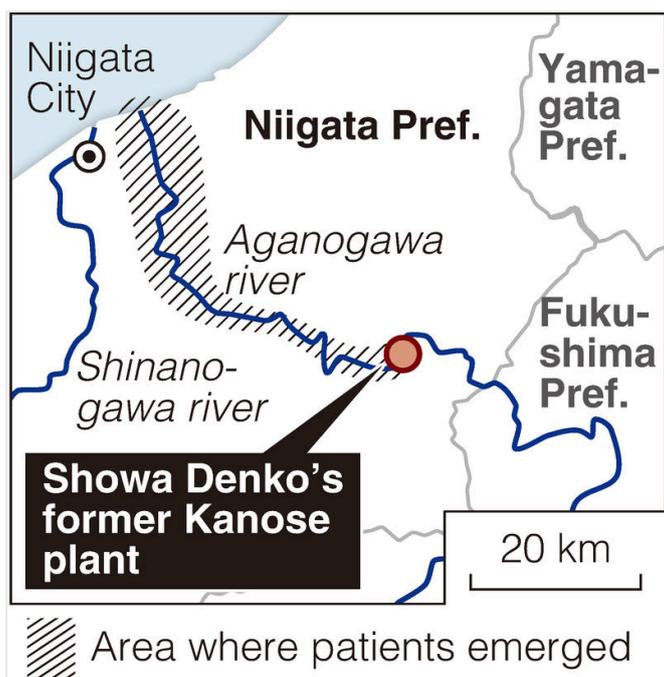
Yet some patients do not want to go public due to fear of discrimination and bias.

After half a century, the tragedy appears to be far from settled.

Patients' motives questioned

Eiichi Minagawa, 71, was at a ceremony on May 31 in Niigata to observe the 50th anniversary. "None of the problems have been solved. I wouldn't call this a turning point," he said, giving a cold glare to Environment Minister Yoshio Mochizuki, who was also in attendance.

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Minagawa leads a group of unrecognized patients who have brought a fifth lawsuit seeking compensation from the central government and Showa Denko K.K., the company that caused the disease.

The lawsuit was filed in December 2013, nearly half a century after the disease was officially recognized.

Asked why he did not join previous suits, Minagawa said: "I was scared to identify myself. I saw how others were accused of 'faking it' just to get money."

So far, 702 Niigata Minamata disease patients have been recognized, but 1,376 people have had their applications rejected.

The figure is lower than that for government-recognized sufferers of Minamata disease caused by the Chisso Minamata Plant in Kumamoto Prefecture.

Many potential patients are believed to be unaware that their symptoms are caused by Minamata disease or are frightened of facing discrimination and bias.

The most commonly known variety of Minamata disease is the hyperacute type, in which patients become mentally deranged and then die.

However, other typical symptoms include numbness in the hands and feet, ringing in the ears and a narrowed field of vision.

Because such symptoms are virtually impossible to detect externally, a skepticism about "fake patients" has developed.

Hisashi Saito, 84, is the honorary director of Kido clinic in Niigata. He has been seeing Minamata sufferers since the illness first emerged.

Saito said he has seen people whose "marriages have gone sour or who got fired from their jobs after it became known they had the disease."

Symptoms can appear over time, depending on the amount of methylmercury that reaches the brain.

They can also worsen as patients age. Due to their dulled sense of touch, some have cut or

burned themselves without realizing it.

With patients growing older, the Niigata group has been trying to uncover potential sufferers of the disease. There were 22 plaintiffs when the fifth lawsuit was filed, but that number has since grown to 76.

Since last October, 73 people reporting symptoms have sought advice from the group. Many cited fear of being in the public eye when asked why they have not come forward until now. Though some had sought a doctor's diagnosis, they were stopped by their families.

“Even half a century later, people still don't understand. Fear of discrimination and prejudice runs deep,” said Shozo Suyama, the group's secretary general. Due to such fears, plaintiffs in the third lawsuit were anonymous.

In March, the Niigata District Court granted official patient status to seven of the 10 plaintiffs. However, the court rejected claims by three plaintiffs with no recognized patients in their households.

“The people who have been recognized are the ones who gathered all their courage,” said Akira Takashima, who led their legal team. “It doesn't make sense not to recognize people just because a family member who has symptoms doesn't want to go public.”

At the ceremony, Mochizuki said: “The judiciary does not disavow the relief system that has been put in place. In the future, this work needs to be carried out scrupulously and Minamata disease sufferers must be dealt with sincerely.”

■ Niigata Minamata disease

A disease that occurred when Showa Denko K.K.'s Kanose chemical plant in Aga, Niigata Prefecture, released wastewater containing methylmercury into the Agano River. The chemical was a byproduct of manufacturing acetaldehyde. Residents of the area near the river experienced symptoms of neurotoxicity after eating contaminated fish and shellfish. The illness is also referred to as the second Minamata disease.Speech