Truth about STAP fabrication case must be uncovered

The Yomiuri ShimbunThe controversy over two articles written by an international team led by a RIKEN researcher, about what it calls stimulus-triggered acquisition of pluripotency (STAP), must be regarded as a situation that seriously affects this nation’s scientific research. Japan’s scientific efforts are at risk of losing international confidence.

On Tuesday, RIKEN’s investigative committee published a final report that concluded the papers in question contained “deliberate alterations and fabrication.”

RIKEN has said it will urge the team led by Haruko Obokata, the lead author of the theses, to retract them.

RIKEN’s authority has been dealt a serious blow, only two months after the team drew international attention to papers claiming success in creating the STAP cell as “a third kind of pluripotent cell.” What were the factors behind this? We hope RIKEN will keep trying to uncover the whole truth, including whether the STAP cell truly exists.

Through fact-finding interviews with people involved with the papers in question, the investigative panel has declared that Obokata was solely responsible for misconduct that included alterations to an image used in

the articles.

The RIKEN committee has concluded that several photos used in the articles were “fabricated.” This conclusion is particularly disconcerting in that the images in question were claimed by the team as evidence proving the pluripotency of STAP cells. The authenticity of the papers has been fundamentally shaken.

The panel also mentioned inadequacies attributable to figures with ties to RIKEN, whose names were included in the list of the papers’ coauthors. Its report said these people had not done enough to fulfill their duties related to the articles, including the examination of the data presented by Obokata.

When the papers about the STAP method were published in January, RIKEN officials spoke with a unified voice in praising the achievement claimed by Obokata’s team. They emphasized the discovery had been made possible as a result of veteran scientists supporting the innovative ideas generated by such a young researcher.