Introduction

On Mental Health Disorders in the Workplace

In the last decade or so, Japan has suffered from a high level of suicides in excess of 30,000 per year. In fact, Japan's suicide mortality rate per 100,000 population is markedly higher than in western industrialized nations. According to a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, patients suffering from mood disorders (including depression) have more than doubled from 433,000 fifteen years ago to 958,000 in recent years. In view of this, the Ministry has drawn up a policy on measures to prevent suicide, including the establishment of a "Project Team against Suicide and Depression." One point emphasized within this process is "to elevate mental health countermeasures in the workplace." The reasons for this are that a high proportion of all suicides (around 27%) are committed by persons in employment, and that suicides are often caused by work-related problems, including fatigue due to long working hours or overwork, human relations in the workplace, and other factors.

The Ministry's "Guidelines for Maintaining and Improving Workers' Mental Health" set out basic rules on methods of implementing mental health care, as the future direction for effective practice aimed at maintaining and promoting workers' mental health in places of business. Specifically, it highlights the importance of preventive action plans aimed at maintaining mental health, training and provision of information on promoting mental health care, the response to persons with mental health disorders, and ways of supporting their smooth return to work.

Although public concern for the maintenance of workers' mental health has recently been raised in this way, a number of measures will be essential to prevent an increase in workers with mental health disorders as a problem in reality. One of these will be to clarify the causes behind mental health disorders, such as workplace environments and working conditions. Another will be to study preventive measures designed to stop mental health disorders from occurring in the first place, as well as appropriate response measures once a disorder has taken hold. In this Special Edition, therefore, the focus will be on the maintenance of workers' mental health in the workplace, and to this end, papers written from the perspectives of organizing the present situation of workers' mental health disorders, their causes, response and countermeasures will be introduced.

The first of these perspectives is that of organizing the present situation of mental health. Two papers will be introduced in this regard. In "Mental Disorders among Today's Labor Force and Preventive Measures," Yujiro Hara notes that mental health disorders in the workplace have become a major problem in recent years. In this respect, the author points out that the approach of preventive medicine to mental health disorders has undergone a change. That is, in the past, concern was focussed on efforts aimed at early discovery and response, treatment, workplace reinstatement and preventing recurrence in individuals.

In recent years, however, there have been growing expectations of measures designed to prevent mental disorders from developing not just in individuals but in workplace environments and whole organizations as well. Along with this shift in mental health countermeasures from an "individual-oriented type" to an "organization-oriented type," Hara asserts the importance of employers proactively tackling mental health care. This can take forms such as providing training on mental health for employees and supervisors, improving workplace environments, and enhancing support by specialist staff in industrial health.

With companies now being urged to take positive action on mental health, what efforts have actually been made in recent years? In "What Types of Companies Take a Proactive Approach to Mental Health?," Kazuya Ogura analyzes factors influencing whether an employer makes efforts toward mental health in the workplace, the adequacy of those efforts, variation in numbers of workers suffering from disorders, levels of concern, etc. This analysis is based on individual data from the "Research on Mental Health Management in the Workplace" conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training in 2010. Ogura also studies the correlation between efforts for mental health and two types of variable: (i) those connected with corporate attributes such as sector and scale, and (ii) variables such as changes in numbers of regular employees, the clarity of procedures and rules on the treatment of employees taking leave, and so on.

The second perspective concerns the causes of mental health disorders among workers. In "Workaholism and Mental and Physical Health," Takashi Fujimoto studies the mechanisms and causes behind mental health conditions based on the current status quo. The author focuses on the correlation between the characteristics and awareness of individual workers toward their work (as illustrated by the word "workaholic") and their mental health. While "workaholic" is generally assumed to have negative connotations such as being "addicted to work," it is also a fact that some workers have a high level of involvement in their work and actually enjoy working long hours. Based on a study of the various elements that characterize a "workaholic", Fujimoto studies the correlation between "workaholism" and issues such as working hours and health, including positive aspects of the ways in which individuals involve themselves in their work.

Workers suffering from mental illness are very likely to take leave or be absent from work. The employer's response to workers in such cases can be said to have a big impact on the issues of continued employment and treatment for mental illnesses. Thus, as the third perspective, two papers are introduced. The first presents views from a legal standpoint on ways of handling dismissal and other matters arising in connection with mental health problems, while the second deals with companies' response and specific measures for workers with mental health disorders.

In "Employers' Response to Workers Appearing to Suffer from Mental Illness—A Recent Supreme Court Judgment, the Law and the Administration", Fumiko Obata examines the issue of validity in connection with dismissal and other disciplinary action by companies against workers suffering from mental illness. As a specific court precedent, the au-

thor introduces the Supreme Court judgment on the Hewlett-Packard Japan case, in which a worker who had been continuously absent due to a mental disorder was compelled to retire on grounds of unauthorized absence. Among other issues, Obata also mentions the draft amendments to the Industrial Safety and Health Act and the Act on Employment Promotion, etc. of Persons with Disabilities (the latter in connection with the mandatory employment of persons with mental illness). Obata suggests that these will have a positive impact on the problems of employing workers suffering from mental health disorders and the mentally ill in future.

In "Return to work following mental health-related absences: Effective evidence-based reinstatement support," Yoko Sugimoto introduces survey data, case studies and others gathered in connection with the activities of the Reinstatement Support Panel, which is administered by the Health Care Center of the Panasonic Health Insurance Organization. The Panel's mission is to facilitate the reinstatement of employees who have been absent due to mental health issues. Specifically, it makes medical judgments on whether an employee who has taken leave in connection with a mental health disorder is ready to go back to work, based on a certificate of diagnosis from the employee's attending physician. This paper describes the life attitude of workers with mental health disorders and specific support until their return to work, based on survey results and case studies of reinstatement eligibility diagnosis for employees who have taken leave in connection with mental health disorders.

As stated at the outset, this Special Edition introduces five papers compiled from the various perspectives of organizing the present situation of workers' mental health disorders, their causes, response and countermeasures. Although each paper raises different points in connection with mental health disorders, an assertion they seem to have in common is that, in recent years, there has been a change of awareness in this regard. Namely, mental health disorders have come to be perceived as a problem to be tackled by workplaces, organizations or society as a whole, rather than being limited to problems of individual workers. As well as self-management by individual workers, the necessity and importance of efforts toward mental health disorders by workplaces and society as a whole is being asserted, and there is more interest in this issue. In that case, finding specific ways of materializing and enhancing efforts on mental health disorders and mental health maintenance could be seen as an important task that should be tackled continuously in future.

<div align="right">

Harumi Muroyama
The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training

</div>