JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES

Junior Faculty Hope Name Change Will Lead to Greater Independence

TOKYO—Sometimes, it's hard to distinguish an assistant professor at a Japanese university from a professor's assistant. By tradition and law, Japanese academic departments are broken up into *koza* (chairs), in which a full professor oversees one or two assistant professors as well as lecturers and research associates. The professor will often pick the assistant's research topics—and take credit for the results—or, conversely, fill their schedule with teaching duties.

But change is coming. Last month, a Ministry of Education advisory committee recommended scrapping the *koza* system. Assistant professors would become associate professors with the same educational and research duties as professors but at a lower rank. Lecturers and research associates would also receive greater independence.

The *koza* scheme, borrowed in the mid-1800s from the German academic model, "has gotten out of date," says Yasuhiko Torii, an economist and former president of Keio University, who heads the advisory committee. "Sometimes younger scientists have no research freedom." The *koza* structure and the status of assistant professors and lecturers are defined by several laws that the committee wants amended.

Some academics welcome the recommendations. "It's a change for the better," says Kumiko Ogoshi, a research associate in environmental health at Nara Medical University, who in 2002 won $1100 from her university after suing her professor for "academic harassment." But the real test, she says, will be seeing who actually makes the decisions on promotions and assignments. "If [such decisions] are still up to a single professor, the recommendations should be reconsidered," she says.

Team effort. Gifu University's Kenichi Tezuka says he already shares responsibility with his chair.

Departments at many leading universities have already abandoned the *koza* system and strengthened the hand of younger scientists. "In my case, I independently conduct my own research," says Kenichi Tezuka, an assistant professor specializing in bone biology at the Graduate School of Medicine of Gifu University in Gifu City. He and his professor split the *koza*'s teaching and administrative duties, he adds.

The new system will need to retain some flexibility to account for the differences among disciplines and universities, says advisory committee member Reiko Kuroda, a professor of biochemistry at the University of Tokyo and a member of the advisory committee. She feels that a more clearly defined status for associate professors should also foster competition—and thus strengthen the research enterprise—by making it easier for academics to move to a new institution.

The committee is soliciting comments and hopes to finalize its recommendations next spring. They would go into effect in 2006 or 2007. **–HIROMI YOKOYAMA**

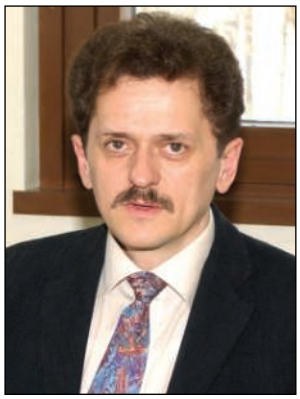
Hiromi Yokoyama is a freelance science writer in Tokyo.

INFLUENZA

WHO Adds More "1918" to Pandemic Predictions

Call it a crash course in the vagaries of risk communication. Until now, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been deliberately cautious in estimating how many people a new influenza pandemic might kill. Dire projections, WHO officials have worried, could damage its credibility. But last week, the agency bowed to experts—including one from its own ranks—who have been ratcheting up the projected death toll in recent months. WHO conceded in a statement that scientifically valid assumptions range as high as 50 million or more—at least seven times WHO's previous maximum number.

How deadly a pandemic will be depends on many factors: for instance, the pathogenicity of the new virus strain, the speed at which it spreads, and how much vaccine is available. Although the specter of millions of deaths might help inject a sense of urgency into the worldwide campaign to prepare, says WHO flu chief Klaus Stöhr, such estimates may also erode trust if the numbers prove too high, or if the pandemic fails to materialize within the next few years.



Doing the math. Klaus Stöhr prefers cautious flu death toll estimates.

That's why WHO stuck to a conservative message, Stöhr says. On its Web site, it cited data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, showing that "today, a pandemic is likely to result in 2 to 7.4 million deaths globally." The numbers were produced by CDC health economist Martin Meltzer, who used a computer model based on a virus strain similar to the one that caused a mild pandemic in 1968.

But others say the next pandemic strain may just as well be highly virulent, like the one that caused the 1918–19 Spanish flu, which claimed at least 20 million lives and perhaps many more. WHO's earlier numbers are "rather ridiculous," says Michael Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy in Minneapolis. In a 25 November e-mail to Stöhr, Osterholm pointed out that given today's world population, a 1918-like virus could kill at least 72 million. "World leaders need to get this message," Osterholm says. On 29 November, a similar message was sounded by Shigeru Omi, director of WHO's Western Pacific Region Office in Manila, who broke ranks by saying publicly that the toll could be as high as 20 million, 50 million, or "in the worst case," 100 million.

Initially, WHO had hoped to end the debate by coming up with new, science-based numbers itself. But there's simply too little anyone can say with any certainty, according to WHO spokesperson Richard Thompson. So a carefully worded statement issued on 8 December and approved at the highest levels simply concludes that experts' estimates "have ranged from 2 million to over 50 million. All these answers are scientifically grounded." The statement calls the earlier 2-to-7-million estimates "best-case scenarios."

The new statement is "still lacking in leadership," Osterholm says. But Peter Sandman, a risk communications consultant from Princeton, New Jersey, who has advised WHO, says the new statement is "a huge improvement" because it acknowledges the scientific uncertainty rather than favoring one scenario. **–MARTIN ENSERINK**

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