

Lest We Forget

A new national leprosy museum opens this month in Japan.

On April 1, 2007, the National Hansen's Disease Museum* opens in the western suburbs of Tokyo. Located adjacent to Tama Zenshoen, one of Japan's 13 remaining leprosy sanatoriums, it supersedes the HIH Prince Takamatsu Memorial Hansen's Disease Museum that has stood on the site since 1993. The decision to enlarge and rename the museum was taken following a landmark legal judgment in 2001.

That was the year when the Kumamoto District Court in western Japan ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed by residents of leprosy sanatoriums. The court found that the government had infringed on their human rights, as provided under the Japanese Constitution, through the policy of isolation it imposed under Japan's Leprosy Prevention Law. The law, introduced in 1907 and reinforced in 1953, was not repealed until 1996 — four decades after the World Health Organization declared in 1960 that the isolation of leprosy patients was unnecessary.

In its ruling, the court ordered the government to apologize and to pay compensation. As part of its apology, the state undertook to augment the displays at the Tokyo museum as a way to promote public awareness of leprosy and help restore the dignity of people affected by the disease. Work on the project, which included the construction of a new two-storey building, began in October 2005.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The purpose of the newly-launched national museum is to present an accurate history of leprosy so that visitors gain an understanding of all aspects of the disease, and to ensure that memories of the subject do not fade. It is also intended as a venue for thinking about the importance of human rights, and for promoting

an end to prejudice and discrimination against the disabled, the chronically ill and society's most vulnerable members.

Permanent exhibits, situated on the second floor of the new building, include the history of leprosy, sanatorium life (medical treatment, day-to-day living, work, religion, education and recreational pursuits), and the situation in other countries. There are also audiovisual testimonials by current and former sanatorium residents.

The first floor houses a video theatre, offices and meeting rooms, while the original building contains a library and space for special exhibitions.

Written explanations and audio guides for every exhibit are available in Japanese, English, Chinese and Korean.

In its previous incarnation, the museum regularly attracted visits from medical and nursing students, religious organizations, human rights bodies, women's groups, and educators, as well as members of the general public. In recent years, visits by elementary and middle school children taking human rights courses had been on the increase.

We hope that as a national museum it will now attract even more visitors. And when they go home, we trust they will have a better understanding of the history of leprosy in Japan, of why the government maintained a policy of isolating those with the disease decades after similar policies were

abandoned in other countries, of the struggle waged by people affected by leprosy over more than half a century for the restoration of human dignity and what they have been able to achieve.

Above all, if they come away with a new respect for human rights and an awareness of the need for compassion, then the museum will have done its job. ■



An exterior of a museum (above) and an exhibit depicting life in a sanatorium

AUTHOR:

Osamu Sagawa



Osamu Sagawa is a member of the steering committee of the National Hansen's Disease Museum. A person affected by leprosy, he lives in Tama Zenshoen, where he is chairperson of the Residents' Association.

Reference

* The National Hansen's Disease Museum:
www.hansen-dis.or.jp