



Minamata:
**Questions for the Japanese Government
and the Chisso Corporation**
October 2013

Introduction: From 1932 to 1968, the Chisso Corporation released an estimated 75-100 tons methylmercury in wastewater from its chemical factory into Minamata Bay, where it bio-accumulated in fish and shellfish. The residents of Minamata, not realizing there was danger in doing so, ate fish and shellfish from the Bay (and the Shiranui Sea), which resulted in widespread mercury poisoning. Tens of thousands of people were affected. Symptoms of mercury poisoning included: ataxia, numbness in the hands and feet, muscle weakness, narrowing of the field of vision, and damage to hearing and speech. In extreme cases, paralysis, coma and death occurred. Mercury can pass through the placental barrier and affect fetuses in the womb.

MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS AFTER MINAMATA DISEASE WAS FIRST DIAGNOSED, QUESTIONS STILL REMAIN.

Why Is There No Comprehensive and Systematic Health Study? Thousands of people suffered crippling illnesses and many died, yet no comprehensive and systematic health study of the Minamata region has ever been conducted and so the number of impacted people remains unknown. No systematic record exists, for example, of the number of people who died without being recognized, people have not or who could not disclose their diseases for fear of discrimination in their community, and fetuses that died before delivery.

Why Is Discredited Criteria Still Used to Deny Compensation? Although 2,273 individuals were officially recognized as Minamata Disease patients as of 2011, several tens of thousands have neurological symptoms characteristic of methylmercury poisoning, but remain formally unrecognized as Minamata disease patients. Approximately 65,000 people have applied to the government for relief for Minamata disease.ⁱ

The diagnostic criteria that the Government has consistently used to certify Minamata Disease were judged medically invalid by the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology (JSPN) in 1998 (JSPN, 1998) and declared invalid by the Supreme Court in 2004 (McCurry, 2006). In February 2013, the Asahi Shimbun reported that the Environment Ministry repeatedly requested a medical doctor to lie in a court case to prevent certification of Minamata disease.ⁱⁱ In April 2013, a Supreme Court judgment noted that there is no scientific proof that all people with Minamata disease have developed symptoms required by the Government and that there is room to recognize a person as a Minamata disease victim by examining evidence including the person's life history.ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, the government has not changed the criteria.

Without government recognition of a Minamata disease diagnosis, a patient cannot be properly compensated.

Why Has Chisso Corporation Not Taken Responsibility for its Actions? From the beginning, Chisso, with help from the government, denied, evaded, delayed and blocked taking meaningful action to limit mercury poisoning from its emissions. In 2009, the Government of Japan allowed the Chisso Corporation to split into two companies to enable it to limit its Minamata disease liabilities. The new law does not establish any review of the Minamata disease certification criteria nor does it establish a program to rigorously investigate the health of residents in the contaminated area.^{iv}

When Will the Site be Fully Cleaned Up? Approximately 1,500,000 m³ of mercury-contaminated sludge with more than 25ppm dredged from the Minamata Bay has been "temporarily" placed for more than 30 years at the landfill site adjacent to the Minamata Bay, without any mercury removal. The site is vulnerable to both earthquakes and tsunamis and the life of-the steel plate column retaining wall is approximately 40 to 50 years. Another contaminated site called the Hachiman residue pool also has not been cleaned up.^v

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT IN MINAMATA? (PLEASE SEE NEXT PAGE)

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Japan committed itself active participation in mercury treaty negotiations “so that the tragedy of Minamata disease should never happen again in any place around the world.” Delegates at the Diplomatic Conference are planning to pass a resolution entitled, “Tribute to the Government of Japan” which says Minamata victims have been “long suffering” and that the international community should learn from the Minamata experience.” However, what should the international community learn? Here are the actions Japan needs to take at home in Minamata.

- **All victims recognized and compensated**
- **Complete cleanup of contaminated areas around Minamata Bay**
- **Polluter responsibility** to restore and rehabilitate contaminated sites and for victims
- **Comprehensive systematic health study** of impacted areas
- **Ban Japanese mercury exports.** Japan continues to export almost 100 metric tons of mercury, mainly to developing countries.

ⁱ http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201208310066

ⁱⁱ http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201302270059

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/04/17/national/supreme-court-recognizes-woman-as-minamata-victim/>

^{iv} <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2009/07/09/national/new-minamata-relief-law-enacted/#.Uj3VsjGCgdU>

^v http://www.ne.jp/asahi/kagaku/pico/mercury/Shiryou/Contaminated_Sites_in_Minamata_en.pdf