

URGENT REQUEST TO ACCELERATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF DRUGS AND VACCINES AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19) (PART 2)

May 13, 2020
Shizuoka Prefecture

Shizuoka Prefecture welcomes the Government of Japan's May 8 decision to include the domestic production of pharmaceutical drugs and medical supplies as a national economic security strategy.

National security, or "traditional" security was considered to consist of self-defense (to protect the nation from foreign threats and terrorism) and disaster preparedness (to protect lives from natural disasters). However, in the face of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic, we are painfully made aware that infectious disease control and prevention is also a significant form of national security that protects our lives, health, and livelihood (work and employment). National security in light of the coronavirus disease now includes self-defense, disaster preparedness, and infectious disease control and prevention.

The Self-Defense Forces defend our nation from foreign threats and provide disaster relief, and frontline healthcare workers treat patients during a public health emergency. Creating a safe and high-quality healthcare environment for our medical care workers will reduce public anxiety, protect lives, and improve health.

The most pressing challenge is the rapid development and commercialization of therapeutic drugs and a COVID-19 vaccine. Domestic production of such remedies and protection will provide a sense of security and moreover, offer an exit strategy to end this coronavirus disease crisis.

Japan's annual defense budget is approximately 5 trillion yen, which hovers at around one percent of our total GDP. Annual procurement of 1.44 trillion yen is expended to private companies such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Heavy Industries. If we were to apply defense procurement in the context of infectious disease control, budget would be allocated to drug treatments and vaccine development. Ten billion yen is needed for research and development and 100 billion yen for the steps including and beyond clinical trials to produce a single drug or vaccine.

Only one Japanese company made the top 20 global pharma companies, and according to the April 2018 to March 2019 business year results, those with an operating profit of

over 200 billion yen were Takeda Pharmaceutical Company and Astellas Pharma. Only five pharma companies made over 100 billion yen, and others ranged from billions to several tens of billions in profit. While highly motivated and competent, this situation has left Japanese pharmas cautious with pursuing their drug and vaccine development ventures, which require high financial cost and is high risk in nature.

If Japan were to allocate one percent of the approximate 100 trillion yen emergency economic stimulus, or one trillion yen for R&D investment, this would encourage our pharmaceutical companies to launch their drug and vaccine development undertakings without fearing failure (toxicity and serious adverse reactions in late stage development). This investment would spur competition among researchers and pharmaceuticals, thus accelerating the domestic production of the much needed remedies and prevention options against COVID-19.

Controlling and preventing the spread of infectious diseases is national security. Developing drug remedies and a vaccine against COVID-19 before the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games would not only protect our athletes and people, but it would contribute to global health and greatly benefit humankind.

This urgent request is a continuation of the previous April 20 request. Shizuoka Prefecture strongly urges the Government of Japan to establish an exhaustible one-trillion-yen fund to reduce the strain on frontline medical workers and bolster pharmaceutical confidence to develop potential COVID-19 treatments and prevention options.

The followings are recommended regarding the drug and vaccine development fund for emerging infectious diseases (hereinafter, the fund):

1. Given the nature of this emergency and from a national strategy perspective, the fund will be managed by the economic division of the National Security Secretariat, Cabinet Secretariat, and not by the current Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development.
2. The scheme outlined in the previous urgent request identified the need for a review of basic research and non-clinical study to connect research bodies with pharmaceutical companies. It is suggested that the review be led by Professor Yamanaka Shinya (2012 Nobel Laureate), Professor Omura Satoshi (2015 Nobel Laureate), and Professor Honjo Tasuku (2018 Nobel Laureate).

3. Clinical tests and screening procedures will be fast-tracked to expedite the product development of new drugs.

Note:

This urgent request is based on comments made by Governor Kawakatsu Heita during the National Governors' Association video conference concerning the nationwide state of emergency declaration on May 12, 2020.