

Lessons from COVID-19—Recommendations on how to report and communicate about the next pandemic (Summary)

By volunteers from the Japanese Association of Science and Technology Journalists

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Recommendation 1: There is always a need for someone to play a role like Dr. Omi.

- During a pandemic, a “spokesperson” who combines specialized knowledge with administrative capabilities is essential.
- The Japan Institute for Health Security, newly established in 2025, should train such personnel, and these individuals should serve as spokespersons during crises.
- If the Cabinet Agency for Infectious Disease Crisis Management, established within the Cabinet Secretariat in 2023, is to be the main public relations entity during crises, specific methods for training and appointing spokespersons should be established to enable an immediate response should an emergency arise.
- Collaboration with risk communication specialists is important, as emotionally considerate communication is crucial.
- Human resource development and network building should also be advanced at the local government level.

Recommendation 2: Government and experts must make the discussion process as transparent as possible.

- For policies that significantly impact citizens’ lives, the discussion process must be made transparent and the reasons for decisions must be explained.
- The government’s “Expert Panel on COVID-19 Response” published a report in June 2022, but it was compiled in only about one month.
- In the United Kingdom, an independent inquiry led by a former judge was organized starting June 2023, with public hearings scheduled to continue for three years. Japan should also conduct a comprehensive review of its COVID response.

Recommendation 3: Politicians at the center of government should understand the roles of politicians and experts, and fulfill their responsibilities as politicians based on this understanding.

- Each party should act based on the division of roles: “Experts provide scientific advice to the government but do not make decisions” and “The government makes decisions. When scientific advice is not accepted, the reasons must be explained.”
- It is the politicians’ responsibility to ensure smooth coordination among relevant ministries, local governments and experts.

- It is natural for situations to change over time, and the public should understand this and not be critical when “statements change.”
- When disseminating information, it is desirable to also convey “the degree of uncertainty.”

Recommendation 4: Media should reflect on this experience and autonomously create “guidelines” for the next pandemic.

- There needs to be reflection on the frequent reporting that forced “experts” and “politicians” to become adversarial.
- Journalists themselves questioned whether their reporting / coverage was “too sensational,” but the answer is difficult.
- Before memories fade, issues should be identified, and simultaneously, examples of overseas reporting should be collected and analyzed to autonomously develop “Guidelines for Pandemic Reporting.”

Appendix

- The information dissemination situation this time can be divided into: First Period – mass media extensively conveyed information from experts; Second Period – realizing that information wasn’t reaching young people, experts began using SNS; Third Period – information dissemination became a cacophony of competing voices.
- During the pandemic, various information circulated regarding treatments, vaccines, masks, etc., causing confusion. Looking back at the PCR testing issue as one specific example, it became a controversy that divided public opinion, but the “testing strategy” proposed by experts received little media coverage and failed to penetrate society. One reason was that it was announced on the same day as recommendations regarding the “Go To Travel” campaign, which drew high social interest. A second reason was the pre-existing lack of basic knowledge about testing in society.

The Japanese Association of Science and Technology Journalists (JASTJ) was established in 1994, bringing together over 220 science journalists and communicators. Activities include selecting recipients of the “Science Journalist Award,” conducting the “Science Journalist Juku” training course and participating in the “World Conference of Science Journalists.” Website: <https://jastj.jp/>

These recommendations were compiled through discussions by volunteers following JASTJ’s monthly seminar in December 2024, which featured Dr. Shigeru Omi, former government advisory panel chair, as a guest speaker. The full text of the recommendations can be viewed at: <https://jastj.jp/other/20250513/>