

# Dr. Soma Hiroaki

Professor Emeritus of Tokyo Medical University



Born in Abashiri, Hokkaido. After he entered Faculty of Science, Keijo Imperial University in 1940, he made progress to Faculty of Medicine in the same university. After the war, he was transferred to Faculty of Medicine, Kyushu University, and then he acted as an internship in National Fukuyama Hospital; thereafter, he entered Department of Pathology in Faculty of Medicine, Tottori University. Then, after working in Obstetrics and Gynecology department of Tokyo Medical University, he served as Research Fellow at Boston Lying-in Hospital, Pathological Department, and was invited to Dartmouth Medical School as Visiting Professor. In 1978, he started the medical consultation to mothers and children in Nepal as well as the research on placenta. In 1992, Order of Gurkha was bestowed to him by King of Nepal. He is now Visiting Professor of Saitama Medical University Hospital and Honorary Director of Josai Hospital in addition to the position of Professor Emeritus of Tokyo Medical University.

## Medical Doctor in active duty at the age of 101

A man of passion, admired in Nepal as Father of Obstetrics and Gynecology

This year (2023) he has come to the age of 101 (one hundred and one) .

Has he retired? Absolutely not.

Twice a week every week, he commutes from his home to his work by trains, which takes him two hours one-way: his work is an outpatient doctor in Obstetrics and Gynecology in Josai Hospital (Ibaraki prefecture) and teaching in Saitama Medical University Hospital (Saitama prefecture). It is not all. He goes to Tokyo Medical University Pathological and Microscopic Laboratory once a week for his own research and study. His long life has been filled with truly remarkable events: the misery and tragedy at the time of the war, the earnest devotion to the study of placenta and the dedicated medical aid to Nepal.

## Dreamed of becoming a medical doctor in a city of extreme cold

Soma grew up in Abashiri city, which is located in Hokkaido where the winter is extremely cold and trying. In winter, the Okhotsk Sea in front of him was fully packed with drifting ice. In 1936 when Soma was a junior high-school student, Professor Strutton, Cambridge University (astrophysics) in England, came there in order to observe the total eclipse of the sun. Professor Strutton made a special lecture in Abashiri middle school. His speech was in English and delivered to the audience through a translator. It was an impressive speech but what Soma really felt was the dire necessity of the knowledge of languages. He thought that he must possess the sufficient knowledge of languages in order to understand the different cultures. Therefore, until now, he has been learning English, German, Spanish, Russian, Nepali and Korean, even though, he says, not so enough for extreme examinations.

## Keijo Imperial University and the end of war

Graduating from Abashiri junior high-school in 1940, Soma travelled from Abashiri to Seoul via two channels. He entered Faculty of Science (Category B), Keijo Imperial University. In those days, there were only two universities which offered the study of Mongolia: Kyoto National University and Keijo Imperial University. The latter was more attractive to Soma in view of lower tuition fee. Amount of fee mattered to him because he could not expect the financial support from the parents as both of them had already been dead. In 1942, Soma moved to Faculty of Medicine in the same university. All those years, he always dreamed of visiting Mongolia. The opportunity finally came when he joined the Keijo Imperial University's academic research team to Gobi Desert area. The team leader was Professor Izumi Seiichi (later the chief of Tokyo University Oriental Culture Research Centre). During the research activity with Professor Izumi in Mongolia in the following year, Soma met the end of the war. He suspended the research and returned as far as to Beijing where he found that all the trains were crammed full of soldiers and people so there was no space at all. But his group was fortunate enough to finally find vacancy in the ambulance train and managed to reach Seoul. He was exasperated to see that so many people were tragically wounded or killed by the war.

## Engaged in medical treatment of war sufferers

When the war was over, people who had been living in northern Korea and Manchuria were coming back to Seoul, and the staff members and the university students started returning to Japan. But Soma had no place to return. So he stayed on to give medical treatment to the war sufferers together with the other medical staff members of the university. In the end of 1945, Soma took up a duty to transfer the sick and wounded Japanese refugees to Pusan on the ambulance train. Most of the express trains took 5 hours from Seoul to Pusan but the ambulance train, full of the sick and wounded, took one full day. Soma kept close observation of the conditions of more than 100 sufferers in the darkness which was only lit

by candle flames. During the trip, one baby fell into dyspnea (difficulty in breathing) but Soma's competent treatment successfully brought the baby to full recovery. Soma took care of all the sufferers well and they finally reached Pusan without any loss. Soma remembers that he, at that time, was driven by the sense of duty as a medical man who had to save the sufferers in front of him; and also by the flaming love to the fellow countrymen.

In 1946, Soma entered Faculty of Medicine, Kyushu University. After the graduation, he came to Fukuyama city (Hiroshima prefecture). He lived in the Fukuyama Hospital's premises and worked as an unpaid intern. He gathered a lot of experiences there. After a time, he passed the state examination and obtained the medical license. Obstetrics and gynecology department was newly created in Fukuyama Hospital and Dr Soma began his career as an obstetrics and gynecology doctor. In 1949, Dr Soma became Assistant Pathologist in Faculty of Medicine, Tottori University. In 1957, he became Lecturer at Tokyo Medical University. When asked about the core of his philosophy as a medical doctor, Dr Soma answers without hesitation that it is the service to the new life.

### Study of placenta is my lifework

Louis Pasteur (a French bacteriologist) said "Chance favours the prepared mind."

It is the motto of Dr Soma; he says "science may go along with chance but we can never grasp it without piling up of daily effort".

When Dr Soma was in the middle of his 30's, he came across the book "Gynecologic and Obstetric Pathology" written by Professor Novak of John Hopkins University. This book impressed him of the great progress of American medicine so much that Dr Soma laboriously hand-copied all the pages of the book. In Tokyo Medical University, Dr Soma was in charge of the patients with metastasis of trophoblastic disease attributable to placenta. He noticed the high mortality rate of the patients with metastatic choriocarcinoma, and felt the urging necessity to study more in America. In 1959, Dr Soma wrote to Professor Hertig of Pathology, Harvard Medical School, on his wish to study more about trophoblast. He received a telegram from Dr Benirschke of Boston Lying-in Hospital, who was the authority on placenta, saying that he should come at once.

Dr Soma went to Harvard University as the researcher and received the direct education and guidance from Dr Benirschke. Dr Benirschke later became Professor in Faculty of Medicine, Dartmouth University and US San Diego Medical School as well as the creator of San Diego Zoo; and he left great achievements on the study of genetics and wrote many books on placenta. As Dr Soma observed Dr Benirschke closely beside him, Dr Soma came to believe that "the study of placenta is the subject, to which I shall dedicate my life".

## Transcending the boundaries

One important thing that Dr Soma learned from Dr Benirschke is the philosophy of “One Medicine”, which emphasizes that medicine should be beneficial not only for humans but for all the creatures on earth. Dr Soma appreciated the importance of “Frozen Zoo” in which the cells of the endangered species were preserved. About this time, Dr Soma started the study of pedigree chart of antelope. “The studies of placenta and chromosome of various creatures will definitely contribute to the development of obstetrics and gynecology for human” is his belief.

He has travelled in and out of Japan. He looked into the cause of death of Giant Panda in Ueno Zoo. He helped the childbirth of an African elephant. Recently, he published a book “Fellow Animals in the Frozen Zoo”, the book to introduce his own history of research and study in the style of a travel journal. His recent interest is in the sea creatures like sharks which have placenta. “Placenta is amazing. Its function is biologically reasonable and the research is really interesting. I am infinitely fascinated. I have studied so much but there are still so many unknown elements. It is important to work basing on the philosophy of “One Medicine”, in which we transcend all the frameworks and boundaries of specialization”, says he. Dr Soma, in full enthusiasm and with endless inquisitive spirit, endeavours to look into the bottom of the secret of life.

## Medicine for the Nepalese

Dr Soma first visited Nepal in 1978. He had read a report that people in Andes highland had large-size placenta but when they came down to lowland, their placenta became normal size. Dr Soma doubted it. In order to investigate it by himself, he went to Nepal, which is located in Himalaya being higher than Andes. While working in Maternity Hospital in Kathmandu, he was asked by Dr Malla (director of Maternity Hospital) to see patients. Dr Soma suddenly realized that there were many Nepalese who could not receive proper medical treatment because of poverty and that the mortality rate in the perinatal period (an indication to show the health conditions between younger mothers and premature infants) in Nepal was the highest in the world. There were no medical doctors in the rural area; there were only helpers instead of midwives. There was a medical institute called “Health Post” but it did not even have a nurse. It means that practically no one could receive proper medical care in Nepal. Overwhelmed by the reality, Dr Soma decided to help the people in Nepal by establishing the proper medical services. Since then, he visited Nepal regularly to make sure that the proper medical care was given to the mothers and children as well as to do his own further research and study of placenta. All those visits to Nepal were managed by his own expense. Through his experiences, Dr Soma came to the idea that the development of medicine and the high standard of living must not be monopolized by the people in the advanced countries but must be shared with the people in other parts of the world.

## The Establishment of Nepal Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology

In Nepal, Dr Soma became Adviser to Maternity Hospital, and Professor in Faculty of Medicine, Tribhuvan University. He gave medical services in the rural villages, where there was no doctor. Dr Soma called out to the doctors in Nepal: “At present, there is not even a text book on Obstetrics and Gynecology in Nepal. In order to raise the medical standard and to lower the perinatal mortality rate, we must train and grow the proper obstetricians and gynecologists. To achieve this purpose, we should create the Nepal Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology.” In response to his call, the society was established in 1989. It started with only 20 members but now it has more than 200 members. It has been accepted to join Asian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology and has gradually been expanding the activity. When the members did not have the financial means to attend the conference abroad, Dr Soma solicited support from outside sources like Ikebukuro Rotary Club. His effort enabled the doctors, nurses, midwives and laboratory technicians of Nepal to come to Japan and to attend the international conferences. In 1992, in the appraisal of his achievement, Order of Gurkha was bestowed to Dr Soma by the King of Nepal. Dr Soma is admired and called Father of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Nepal and the bond between him and the medical workers in Nepal is very strong and everlasting.

## International medical aid to other countries

Dr Soma's involvement in the medical aid is not limited to Nepal. He is one of the directors in a public interest corporation “Japan International Friendship and Welfare Foundation” (abbreviated as JIFF). When JIFF opened “Clinic for Afghan refugees” in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1991, he was greatly involved. Located near the border, Peshawar was not a safe place. It was thought that terrorists were lurking there. The clinic was visited by so many patients everyday that the clinic workers did not have time to rest. It was a sad reality that there were many children suffering from malnutrition and congenital anomalies. In 2002, the clinic was moved to Kabul, Afghanistan and re-named “Clinic for Mothers and Children”. Dr Soma rode a bus from Peshawar to Kabur to attend the opening ceremony. He recollects the trip: “The road from Peshawar to Kabur was just terrible. The bus went up Khyber Pass, down the steep winding slope, and rolled into a dubious-looking place where Taliban might be lurking. The bus, which started early in the morning, finally arrived at Kabur very late at night. I was horrified by the sight of Kabur that I saw the next morning. The field was utterly destructed by the violent combat. But we opened the clinic and began the work.” This clinic still exists but is now managed only by the local people.



Opening ceremony of “Clinic for Mothers and Children”

In 2005, JIFF started the support of the opium eradication project in Thailand called “Doitung Development Project”, which was initiated by Thai royal family. This project is being executed mainly in the mountain area of north Thailand, which was once notorious for opium growing. Dr Soma has visited those places including the malaria and tuberculosis patients in the countryside of Myanmar and given various guidance and advice to IIFF. The wide experience and deep knowledge that Dr Soma acquired in Nepal and other places are always precious and valuable and relevant in any international medical aid anywhere.

### Greetings from Professor Sanu Maiya Dali in Kathmandu

*“Congratulations as being interviewed as Medical Contributor for Nepal. I would like to read it. You can send me the English translation of the Japanese version.”*

Professor Sanu Maiya Dali is the Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal and she is my good Nepalese friend. Accordingly, I hope this report will be available for contribution to Nepal Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology. Soma

### Editor’s note

When talking with Dr Soma, I never felt his age. He is always active, strong and passionate, and gave me interesting topics in a row. He says his hobby is reading books and placenta. “My present dream is to travel to Greenland to see the placenta of the shark which has been living 400 years,” says he with bright and youthful smile. His sincere attitude to look into the origin of life was impressive. His talk about the tragic experience at the time of the war was touching. He is of an exceptionally strong personality. With the belief that there is always a way in any difficult situation, he has cut open the way and has overcome all the raging waves of life. “There should be no border in science. When we have a subject to work on, our perspective must be broad and the frameworks and boundaries of specialization must be transcended.” Those who are involved in the international aid and cooperation should appreciate his words. (Kaneko Takashi)