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In Memoriam: Dr. Toshio Tatara, 1937–2012

On April 23, 2012, the field of elder abuse prevention lost a giant with the passing of Dr. Toshio Tatara. While it may seem strange to say he was cut down in his prime at the age of 75, Toshi, as his friends called him, was still embarking on new avenues for serving the field and advancing knowledge. He retired from the Shukutoku University Graduate School of Integrated Human and Welfare Studies in March 2012 and had recently remarked, “The retirement age is 67 but they have kept me for an additional eight years. I could have stayed for another couple of years, if I wanted.” His “retirement” would be punctuated by serving as newly elected president of the Japan Academy of the Prevention of Elder Abuse (JAPEA); chairing the Interest Group on Elder Abuse for the Gerontological Society of America (GSA); serving on the Board of the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA); consulting for Elder Rights Protection in Japan; and actively contributing to the Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect through the Editorial Board.

Armed with a B.A. in Humanities from Kwansei Gakuin University, Toshi came to the United States in the 1960s determined to earn an education in social welfare. Landing at the American Public Welfare Association in 1976, aging issues became his forte and passion. He became one of the first to champion elder abuse awareness, and in 1988 his vision of a National Aging Resource Center for Elder Abuse (later renamed the National Center on Elder Abuse, NCEA) was realized with funding from the U.S. Administration on Aging. NCEA thrived under Toshi’s direction, bringing recognition, resources, and organization to an issue all but invisible to society and to professions (such as law enforcement, banking, and health providers) that could and should be on the front lines of prevention, education, and intervention. To gain traction as a social issue, Toshi insisted that at the very least we needed to know the extent of the problem. With tremendous expertise in research design and very little funding, he led NCEA in producing the first National Incidence Study in 1998. To date, there is no study of similar size or scope.

Dr. Tatara chose to end his directorship of NCEA in 1998 when, in typical Toshi fashion, he returned to Japan to settle family business. Joining the faculty of Shukutoku University, Toshi acknowledged that it was difficult to re-assimilate into Japanese culture after being in the United States for so long, but noted, “Teaching is still fun and the students are good to
me.” Given the culture, elder abuse was an even more taboo topic in Japan. However, that did not stop Toshi from continuing his crusade to fight elder abuse. While in Japan, he published more than nine books and 30 articles, helped establish the Japan Academy for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, and secured funding for numerous international and Japanese studies. He was heavily invested in recruiting new scholars to the cause but, true to form, Toshi’s mentorship went beyond the typical. Susan Somers, Secretary General of INPEA, remembers that Toshi regularly paid for his students to attend the GSA conferences and made sure they were introduced to the leading researchers and practitioners in the elder abuse arena.

Toshi’s overall contributions to the field were enormous. As widely reported at the time of his death, he directed nearly 50 research, evaluation, and training projects of national significance in the United States and Japan; presented papers at many national and international conferences; served as a technical consultant for U.S. federal, state, and local governments and professional organizations in the United States and Japan; and testified several times before the U.S. Congress. In addition to more than 80 technical reports and monographs that were written for federal and state agencies and various funding organizations, Dr. Tatara was the author of over 90 articles, book chapters, and books.

Beyond his accomplishments, those of us who knew, admired, and respected Toshi are also left with a legacy of memories. It may be hard to imagine that someone so driven to have elder abuse recognized as a societal issue with no international boundaries could also have been a person of abundant good humor and zest. At conferences, after a long day of presenting papers and attending meetings, Toshi was always ready to join his colleagues for an evening of karaoke and sushi. Lori Stiegel, Senior Attorney with the Commission on Law and Aging, recalls one APS/NAPSA conference at San Antonio’s Gunther Hotel. Toshi was delighted to learn that the room he was staying in was occupied the previous night by none other than President Clinton during a campaign stop. Toshi gleefully provided tours of “President Clinton’s hotel room” throughout the conference.

It is with great sadness, but also with great joy for having known him, that we mark the passing of Dr. Toshio Tatara.

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