

Hideo Fukumi: Medical research in the shadow of biological warfare

Xianliang Dong

Business, Economic and Public Policy Research Centre, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, North Point, Hong Kong.

PMID: 37009660 DOI: 10.1177/09677720231167784

Abstract

Hideo Fukumi (1914-1998) is renowned for his position as the director of Japan's National Institute of Health and his scientific contributions to the fields of bacteriology, virology and epidemiology. This article introduces Fukumi's career cultivated over decades in the Japanese national medical system and focuses on his research on Shigella, Salmonella and influenza. Yet any assessment of his career also has to take into account the considerable controversy and scandal it engendered. This necessary reassessment situates Fukumi's contribution within what has been revealed of Japan's biological weapons programme which reached its zenith during the Second World War. Very few scientists, including Fukumi, were prosecuted for their roles in this programme. Contrarily, they became core personnel in post-war medical research due to the patronage of the United States-Japan alliance in the context of the Cold War. Controversies that later surfaced over Fukumi's role in influenza immunisation campaigns reflect two currents of debate: A belated reckoning with Japan's use of biological weapons and the way this was 'normalised' and overlooked in the post-war period. The role of Japanese scholars and citizens' movements who have interrogated Japanese war crimes and the U.S. cover-ups and made a demand for greater ethical transparency in medical science.

Keywords: Hideo Fukumi; Japan's National Institute of Health; US–Japan alliance; biological warfare; influenza.