

Charms of the island that nurture life

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The islands of Kagoshima Prefecture have maintained a high total fertility rate relative to the rest of the country. Based on the total fertility rate ranking of all municipalities from 2013 to 2017, four towns have ranked in the top ten: Isen town at 2nd place, Tokunoshima town at 3rd place, Amagi town at 7th place, and China town at 8th place. There may be some, after looking at these data, who think that the islands are places where childbirth and child-rearing are easily done.

There are 26 inhabited islands in Kagoshima Prefecture, but only five islands have obstetric medical facilities (hereinafter referred to as obstetric facilities) and where woman have access to healthcare during childbirth. Kikai town and Yoron town, ranked 15th and 37th in the previously-mentioned ranking, do not have obstetric facilities on their respective islands. Women go to facilities off the island using boats and planes for maternity health check-ups. When the expected date of delivery approaches, they leave the island and their family, waiting for childbirth while living on an island with the appropriate facilities. Women and their families go through these challenging experiences in order to have children.

I learned about the feelings women who live on islands without any obstetric facilities and how they felt as mothers when interviewing them. “It is sad to leave my older children and family, but I only think about having the baby safely. That is my responsibility as a mother.” Giving birth off the island was supported by the woman’s determination of becoming a mother. Of course, family support plays a large role as well. During the pregnancy, they are told that “they do not have to do the farm work. They should not hold heavy things.” After the pregnancy, they are told that “they should not work with needles or water.” In this way, they are treated well.

Women on the island also have a high ability for self-care. Women not only gathered information from the internet but also actively gathered information from the elderly and other mothers. This information included self-care that was unique to the islands, such as, “Do not eat goat meat,” “Children’s hair will grow well when you eat seaweed,” and “Fish soup is good.” Methods nurtured in the life and culture of the island were handed down through pregnancy.

What was more interesting was what was done when something goes wrong. “When bleeding, call the hospital or public health nurse after carefully observing the amount and color.” This is an observational skill rivaling that of a medical professional. There are more and more women today who feel that everything will be fine in pregnancy or childbirth if left to the devices of medical professionals. It is also a struggle for midwives to bring out the independence of women. However, women on the island felt a high level of awareness that they would be the ones responsible for protecting their own bodies and children.

I once conducted a survey on health guidance on islands. The impetus for this survey was that I had heard that mothers were less likely to attend maternity classes and would think that everything regarding pregnancy and childbirth would be fine. However, the circumstances that were revealed through the data told a different story. Women were skillfully collecting the necessary information. They would directly ask midwives and doctors at the time of maternity health check-ups about obtaining medical information according to their own conditions. They would ask experienced people close to them about matters relating to pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. I felt that this easy-going attitude, thinking that everything will work out, was actually a flexibility based on some degree of information and evidence.

Student training is also conducted on the islands. There are many students from the prefecture who have visited the islands for the first time and many who do not know the islands frequently have negative impressions of them, such as the inconvenience of island life, or the difficulty of island medical care. However, the students' image of the island changes significantly once they go there and interact with the people and lives of the island, and see the actual circumstances of island medical care. They realize that not having medical facilities or resources is not restrictive or inconvenient. They also learn the strong feelings of "protecting the lives of the people on the island with our own ability" shared among the medical professionals on the islands, and this has a great impression on the students, who are seeking to become medical professionals themselves. The islands are a place that fosters a sense of responsibility in medical students, as well as a sense of duty.

In the present day, when we prioritize convenience and avoid troublesome relationships, we feel that it is the activities of the people on the island who make us aware of the important things we are on the verge of losing. Above all, the vitality of the women on the island is wonderful. I will continue to study the island as my field site and teach students. I am excited to see what kinds of wonderful things I will notice next time.



A woman who immerses her baby's feet in seawater and wishes for her healthy growth (April 7, 2019, Yakomo, China town; provided by *Nankai Nichinichi Shinbun*)