

March 11, I remember.....

In retrospect, a magnitude 7.2 earthquake on March 9 was merely a foreshock to the now-famous magnitude 9.0 event of Friday, March 11. I was working alone in a 5th floor office; next door, also working alone, was Professor Kenneth Nollet, an American medical doctor who was one of my supervisors. Professor Hitoshi Ohto, my former department chair and current medical school dean, was more than 1000 kilometers away attending a conference.

The shaking didn't stop. It got worse. Professor Nollet stepped into my office. "Alain-sensei, our Japanese colleagues seem to prefer the hallway when this happens." We moved together into the hall. Pieces of sheetrock and ceiling tile were falling to the floor. A fire extinguisher spilled out of its retainer. A full-width steel barrier door, normally flush against the wall, swung loose into the hallway just a few meters from where Professor Nollet and I struggled to remain standing.

A somber aphorism of medicine came to mind: "Bleeding always stops." Tremors, too. In either case, the goal is to maintain pulse and respiration. Breathe, pray, repeat. Foxholes and earthquakes have something in common.

The shaking stopped. We opened our office doors. Full-length bookshelves in Japan are routinely secured to the wall and ceiling. They were fine, but things didn't turn out well for the books, or my computer I had left on my desk. Yes, we did well by stepping into the hall.

After the earthquake, FMU still had electricity, telephone, and Internet, but municipal water was interrupted for a week. The campus keeps a 600-ton reserve, but normally uses 150 tons of water every day, so extreme conservation measures had to be introduced. Having to step outside of the hospital to use a chemical toilet annoyed me, until I realized that this would be a way of life for nearly 100,000 coastal refugees in the months ahead.

In the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant released radioactive particles into the air and water, drawing global attention and concern that later became a global problem. This prompted authorities to establish a long-term health survey of all Fukushima residents. Professor Yasumura Seiji, our department chair, is one of the core members. We believe that Fukushima Survey will yield new insights about radiation and health for the good of our prefecture and world citizens for generations to come.

Alain Ngoma (with Kenneth Nollet)