

JAPAN CONSUMER INFORMATION CENTER

# JCIC NEWS

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## JCIC renamed

On the occasion of its 30th anniversary on October 1 this year, JCIC have decided to change its name (in English) to the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan (NCAC).

The government established Kokumin Seikatsu Center (JCIC) in October 1970. As declared in the Kokumin Seikatsu Center Act, its objective was to "Supply, examine and study information related to "Kokumin Seikatsu" with an all-around view to contribute to the stability and improvement of "Kokumin Seikatsu". You will notice that there is no mention of the consumer in the declaration. It is not easy to find a term equivalent to "Kokumin Seikatsu" in English but it may be best to compare "Quality of life" in the meaning. In practice, we have been calling as "Japan Consumer Information Center" since its service is centered on the provision of information required for solving problems related to the consumer. The new name of National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan (NCAC) was selected because the old name was not distinct enough to have it recognized as an entity dealing with consumer related issues and was liable to be mistaken for an organization that supplies marketing information.

The new name in English will be officially used

following a public announcement at the 30th anniversary celebration on October 6. The Japanese name of the organization will remain unchanged.

## Tendencies of consumer problems

Massive overhaul that the consumer administration planned

The nation's administrative system consisting of 1 office and 22 ministries will be scaled down to 1 office and 12 ministries while the cabinet is to be functionally reinforced. The government's consumer administration is also due for modernization. The Economic Planning Agency, serving as the executive office of the Consumer Protection Council headed by the Prime Minister, is a general coordinating office that the government uses in conducting the nation's consumer policies. However, this agency will be closed and its roles will be placed under the authority of the Cabinet Office. In the newly organized system, the Quality of Life Policy Bureau will be inaugurated to comprise new divisions such as Consumer Policy, Consumer Affairs, and a division for Volunteering Support Policy. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry looking after commercial activities such as call sales, installment sales, product safety etc., is going to be reorganized as the

Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Environmental issues including the disposal and recycle of wastes, which have been increasing in importance lately, will be overlooked by the agency, but will be raised in the status to the Ministry of the Environment.

This administrative reform aims at cutting back on the number of government officials, now 850,000, by 25% within the next 10 years. It may be difficult, however, to create the new post for a minister on a special mission, i.e. the Minister of Consumer Protection, to take charge of the subject service despite express requests from consumer groups.

- **Outbreak of a massive case of food poisoning from cows milk**

A massive case of food poisoning with nearly 15,000 citizens suffering from symptoms of poisoning such as diarrhea and vomiting since June 27, and 195 being hospitalized as of August 9, has developed from the consumption of "low fat milk" produced by the Osaka Plant of Snow brand Milk Products Co.

The municipal government of Osaka ordered the plant to call in the batch of "low fat milk" that was suspected of being contaminated, and suspended its operation on June 30. The company also closed down the operation of 20 other plants across the country to have them voluntarily examined by third party inspection institutes. The cause of the food poisoning has been determined as a type of toxin called enterotoxin discharged from staphylococcus aureus.

The outbreak of food poisoning has disclosed the awkward realities of a top brand manufacturer. These include inadequate cleaning of temporary piping to transfer raw materials (milk), mixing of materials (milk) in tanks placed outdoor without the necessary temperature control or reusing packed milk for producing processed milk, having seriously damaged the confidence in the top brand.

This incident has also jolted the credibility of HACCP (hazard analysis critical control point) since the plant had been certified by the Ministry of Health and Welfare to be in conformance with HACCP. The toxin was later found in powdered skimmed milk produced by the company's plant in Hokkaido through subsequent research. It was found that skimmed milk from Hokkaido was used by the Osaka Plant as a raw material for the low fat milk in question and that it was the primary cause of the food-poisoning. The dairy industry is seriously worried about the possibility of estranging consumers from dairy products as a result of the accident.

- **Automaker found to have concealed information related to accident reports for over 20 years**

It has been divulged that Mitsubishi Motors has concealed a large volume of information concerning customers' claims that could be directly connected to compulsory recalls and/or improvement measures in the past 20 years.

It was also revealed that the manufacturer has secretly covered up call-in or repairs made on some of the defective cars without submitting relevant reports to the Ministry of Transport

as required by law, an act termed as "The hiding of recallable cases."The Police Department conducted a search of the company's head office and plants on the suspicion of making false declarations in statutory reports on August 27.

This is the first case of compulsory investigation enforced on an automaker since the inauguration of the automobile recall system in 1969.

- **“i-mode” subscribers hit the ten-million mark**

With the explosive diffusion of mobile telephones particularly among young subscribers, the "i-mode" introduced by NTT DoCoMo to enable Internet communication with mobile telephones, has taken the mobile market by storm to gain the record number of subscriptions with over 10 million users. The service enables subscribers to use e-mail and view web sites. The newest models of mobile telephones provide a color screen and weigh less than 100 grams. Competitors have followed suit to develop a mobile service that allows connection to the Internet. In the midst of intensifying competition among service providers, some models of mobile telephones can be bought for only a few thousand yen (US\$20) per unit or, in some cases, as little as one yen (one cent). Official I-mode sites provide various services and the subscriber may be charged for the use of some services billed by NTT together with telephone charges.

Now that a tremendous number of subscribers are carrying Internet terminals in their pockets, JCIC keeps an alert eye on the market to prevent consumers from being involved in unforeseen calamities.

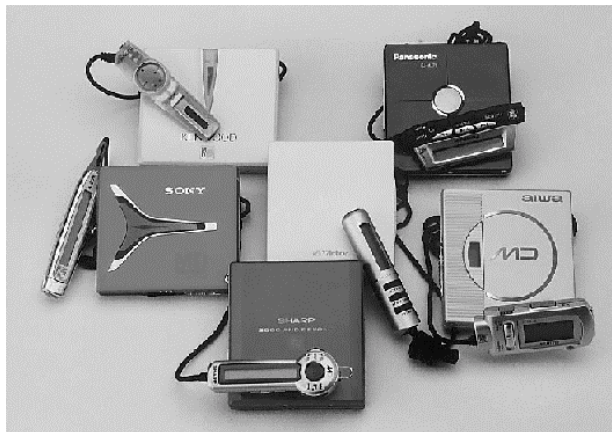
## JCIC's activities

### **Product tests**

- **Portable MD player (Product testing Magazine, Tashikaname (Critical Eyes) August 2000)**

The MD (mini disk) Player has emerged as a high quality digital music player despite its compact size, and the portable MD player, in particular, have become exceptionally popular among the younger generation of subscribers.

The offering of smaller, lighter devices featuring long continuous hours of playback capacity increasing at a fast pace gives us another concern as to whether the reduction in size and weight have been made at the expense of the durability of the device. In fact, Consumer Advice Centers all over the country are receiving many reports from consumers with inquiries or complaints about failures resulting from accidental dropping of the devices or the durability of parts.



*Portable MD player*

It was disclosed by tests performed on 6 brands of MD player that there have been units broken or deformed and rendered unusable as a result of dropping tests under conditions simulating units being accidentally dropped; although they were generally

strong against vibrations. Concerning sound quality, some MDs developed lightly disturbing noise or motor sound. There were also some devices in which playback hours using batteries were shorter than the number of hours indicated in the catalogues by 10%.

- **Health-oriented foods produced from pomegranates (Tashikaname, August 2000)**

We have begun to see health-oriented foods from pomegranates being distributed in the market based on newly acquired information that pomegranates are rich in estrogen (female hormone). Ten brands of such foodstuffs collected from the market were tested and found to contain very little estrogen. Some of the descriptive pamphlets accompanying these foods contained statements that may unnecessarily raise hopes about the content or the useful effects of estrogen, running counter to the provisions of the Pharmaceutical Affairs Act or the Act against Unjustifiable Premiums and Misleading Representations. According to a survey run at the same time, some consumers have been overly hopeful of the alleged effects of these products. It is not recommended to place too much hope on these kinds of products.

- **Pajamas for nursing care and other purposes (Tashikaname, September 2000)**

According to a survey run by MITI on consumers' awareness concerning nursing care tools and products, people have named "Pajamas and clothes that are easy to put on and take off" as articles people want to have when they are disabled. Such clothing used in nursing care should not only be easy to handle for caregivers but also for the disabled. We have, therefore, researched clothing items in terms of ease of wear and handling.

Velcro is often used in such clothing items for convenience purposes but also has shortcomings of being easy to come off and rough on skin. Velcro made of pure cotton, on the other hand, is hygroscopic and shrinkable after being washed.

## Survey

- **One of the most frequently occurring accidents in the home**

According to findings by the Injury Information System operated by JCIC, 813 staircase accidents were reported by hospitals participating with the system during fiscal 1999.

Accidents related to staircases are the most frequent of all accidents taking place in the home every year. As many as 3738 cases of such accidents were reported in the period from August 1992 to March 2000. The age group with the most accidents was infants and small children between 0 and 4 years old followed by the elderly of 65 years and older. The most frequent type of injuries were bruising and grazing wounds (2,429 cases) followed by bone fracture (593), dislocation and ligament rupture (340), respectively. There were 26 cases of intracranial damage and 9 deaths.

The patterns of accidents were classified as follows:

(Note that people have a habit of taking their shoes off in Japanese houses).

- \* Problems with staircases:

- Handrails breaking.

- Tripping over the non-slip belt on the staircase.

- \* Insufficient lighting

- Dark at night.

- Dark even in daylight.

\* Clothing and Footwear

Tights were slippery.

Socks got caught.

Tripped over slippers.

Hem of pants got caught.

\* While carrying an object

Carrying a bed mat or dry laundry.

\* Small children in baby-walkers

Fell down stairs in a baby-walker.

JCIC talks about the points of care at the time of house repair or new construction, daily checks, and attention to be paid while going up and down staircases.

• **Skin burning injuries increasing from artificial tanning light**

As tanning clinics and the use of artificial tanning equipment at home have become increasingly popular among young people to gain a healthy look, the case of skin injuries from burning has also increased with some cases having serious consequences despite suppliers' emphasis on safety aspects. Suppliers promote artificial tanning light by ascertaining that it works to tan human skin by irradiating safe UVA rays only, and suppressing harmful UVB rays.

A suntan is the reaction that occurs as the result of dermatopathy caused by ultra violet (UV) rays. The "A" ray that is said to be relatively weak in such a reaction, is not completely free of adverse effects but has no risk of causing dermatopathy. However, extensive exposure to large quantities of "A" rays may not only cause the development of blotches and freckles but may also weaken immunological competence and cause premature skin aging and

photoallergies. Furthermore, there are reports of the development of skin cancer (carcinoma cutaneum) obtained from the results of animal experiments.

JCIC is concerned about the provision of false information displayed in tanning salon guidebooks and in the advertisement of home tanning devices by manufacturers. The information claims that "tanning by solar rays containing large amounts of UVB rays is quite harmful but artificial tanning by devices with UVA rays is safe". JCIC is therefore requesting that tanning salons and manufacturers that supply tanning equipment include more correct information and, at the same time, endeavor to enlighten consumers with regard to these points.