

NATIONAL CONSUMER AFFAIRS CENTER of JAPAN

NCAC NEWS

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Trends in Consumer Issues

• A Consumer Pavilion at INPAKU

INPAKU is a government-sponsored event organized in commemoration of the new millennium. The central government, local governments, firms, NPOs and international organizations present their various themes and hold exhibitions on the Internet. Consumer groups and other establishments set up a consumer pavilion there to offer reliable consumer information from the viewpoint of consumers. The information covers a wide range from environmental protection, merchandise and service information, to consumer damage information and volunteer activities.

<http://www.inpaku.go.jp/jacas/>



• The Conference on Consumer Protection Holds Its 33rd Meeting

The Consumer Protection Fundamental Act stipulates that a Conference on Consumer Protection (CCP) should be set up as the Central Government's top-ranking body of consumer protection administration. Chaired by the Prime Minister, the CCP is attended by the ministers of ministries and agencies. Held every December, the CCP determines the principles and measures of the consumer policy for the new fiscal year beginning in April the following year.

The CCP held its 33rd meeting on December 8, 2000. The decisions covered six items "Regarding the Promotion of Consumer Administration" and hundreds of items regarding "Specific Measures for Promoting Consumer Protection."

Specific Measures for Promoting Consumer Protection (A Summary)

1. Efforts in consumer protection for promoting the IT revolution
 - 1) Obligate the display of an easy-to-understand application screen in mail-order sales on the Internet and provide more facilities for Internet surf days.
 - 2) Provide a new set of laws for determining the date on which an electronic contract comes into effect and defining provider

responsibilities.

3) Educate consumers to prevent trouble and help private organizations establish an online trust marking program.

4) Install PCs at Consumer Advice Centers and provide an environment where consumers can use IT equipment by themselves and have free access to information about consumption life.

5) Step up efforts to monitor illegal ads.

2. Organizing a set of basic laws to protect personal information

Now that the communications society is becoming advanced and the use of personal information is rising, a set of basic laws regarding the protection of personal information will be established to protect individuals' rights.

3. Efforts to optimize contracts between consumers and enterprise operators

1) In preparation for the Consumer Contract Law coming into effect in April this year, training will be provided for consumer advisers of the NCAC and Consumer Advice Centers. Efforts will also be made to monitor the reality of conflicts regarding consumer contracts and their resolution.

2) Work hard to inform consumers of the promulgated "Law for the Sale of Financial Products." The "Council for Communicating

and Coordinating Financial Trouble," which consists of representatives of the administration, consumers, and the financial industry, will consider improving the system of conflict disposal and performing liaison among the establishments.

3) Step up regulations concerning the business method of selling products to consumers, telling them they will be arranged jobs in exchange, and enforce the laws strictly.

4. Efforts to ensure food safety in response to cases of food poisoning and other incidents

1) Step up monitoring and guidance in response to major incidents of food poisoning due to contaminated products from leading food companies. Build up a system that gives consumers access to historical information about food production, manufacturing methods, and other details.

2) Obligate the safety examination of genetically modified foods in and after April.

5. Efforts to ensure fair and free competition

The recently revised Antimonopoly Act allows a person to claim injunction against violations of the said law. Step up efforts to inform consumers of this law.

6. Helping regional Consumer Advice Centers with their grievance disposal

Promote grievance disposal by expanding the nationwide Practical Living Information Online Network System (PIO-NET), providing training to consumer advisors, and other means.

- **"Personal Revitalization," a New Item for Debt Disposal**

Debt disposal of multiple debtors has so far been managed as follows, depending on the multitude of the debts. It has been referred to voluntary bankruptcy if the debtor cannot pay, and to voluntary disposal or arbitration if the debtor can make payments in installments.

However, voluntary disposal and arbitration are based on a program of paying back the entire principal in installments, so that, if the total debts are above a certain amount, the only option for the debtor is to select voluntary bankruptcy.

Relevant law will therefore be revised so that wage earners who are expected to gain regular incomes will pay as much as they can for three years from their future incomes as a rule and relieved of the balance, so that multiple debtors can be helped to make a fresh start. The revised law will come into effect in April, 2001.

The present revision will add an item of "personal revitalization" to the Code of Civil Revitalization, which used to be designed mainly for firms. Procedures for regular wage earners will be called "wage earner revitalization." These procedures will be applicable when a regular wage earner falls into financial hardship.

Activities of the NCAC

Product Testing

- **Color Printers (Tashikana Me <Critical Eyes>, January, 2001)**

Color printers these days have the selling point that they can print pictures taken with digital cameras and similar equipment with better quality. Many of them sell for high prices. However, consumers want to know whether pricing is really in proportion to image quality. We then tested color printers of seven brands from three manufacturers, of a high-price type and of a mid-to-low price type. We thus tested whether printing screen, printing speed, light resistance of images (fading under sunlight), printing noise and other characteristics varied with pricing. The pricing of test products ranged from about 29,000 yen (about 260 dollars) to 60,000 yen (about 550 dollars).

Here are the results. :

- * Printing quality varied little with pricing, except for some brands.
- * The difference in printing speed is due to the difference in brand, rather than the difference in pricing.
- * Some models discolored considerably due to fading under sunlight or water leakage.
- * Brands that indicate their ink levels and/or allow ink refills for each color are convenient.
- * Some models took more than two hours to print images taken with digital cameras.

- **Gas Table (Tashikana Me, February, 2001)**

In Japan, gas cooking stoves cause most building fires.

More than 70 percent of these fires are caused because the tenants or owners of these buildings forgot to extinguish a fire after they used them.

These days, you often see gas cookers with safety precautions. Safety precautions fall into seven categories:

1) prevention of oil overheating, 2) automatic extinction of the fire before the pot being heated gets burned and damaged, 3) avoid heating an empty pot or kettle, 4) using a heater timer in case of forgetting to switch off a heater, 5) a grill timer in case of forgetting to switch of a grill, 6) a fire die-out safety, 7) a child lock.

Having tested five selected products, we found that their safety features were activated regardless of their price. However, we also found that the glass doors of some products became very hot when their grills were used, resulting in the risk of personal burns.

- **Motor-driven Wheelchairs (Tashikana Me, March, 2001)**

Motor-driven three- and four-wheelers are available on the market for use by elderly persons and other persons with walking disabilities. These vehicles are legally handled as wheelchairs and require no permit. Their speeds are similar to those of people walking at a fast pace. However, these wheelchairs weigh about 50 to 100 kilograms, thus raising the concern as to whether these vehicles are safe for drivers and people around them. We tested eight brands mainly in terms of operability and safety, with the test vehicles actually driven by elderly persons. Product prices ranged from 280,000 yen (2,500 dollars) to 350,000 yen (3,200 dollars).

Overview of the test results:

- * Some users took a long time to learn to drive. Some products were hazardous unless driven after sufficient training.
- * For some products, methods of operating the accelerator levers have not been standardized. Some levers are so shaped that operation is difficult.
- * Some wheelchairs are so heavy that users with less physical strength cannot push them manually on an incline.
- * Some products are devoid of an emergency stopper to avoid risks of mis-operation of the accelerator lever. Some products are equipped with such a stopper, but the stopper is hard to operate.
- * The wheelchairs cannot be manually stopped during travel. They are therefore hazardous should they collide with a pedestrian.

Surveys and Studies

- **Eye disorders due to contact lenses**

In Japan, the number of contact lens users is said to be 13 million (as compared to the country's total population of 110 million). Lenses fall into various types, including hard, soft, disposable, far/near-sightedness combination, and color. The NCAC has received much information about eye disorders, such as mismatched contact lenses damaging the cornea and contact lenses cracking in the eye."

From fiscal 1993 through fiscal 2000, the NCAC received 518 reports of accidents due to contact lenses. Classification by sex indicates that males accounted for 26.0 percent and females 74.0 percent of the

accidents, so that females are three times as prone to contact lens accidents than males. By age, people in the twenties account for 50% of the total.

Predominant symptoms are bloodshot eyes and aching. Specialist physicians say that many patients suffer damage to their cornea. If this progresses, they will suffer a corneal ulcer, and may even become blind.

Among the causes of trouble are:

- 1) many contact lens users have no spectacles and damage their eyes through prolonged contact lens use,
- 2) colored contact lenses, popular among young people, are low in oxygen transmission because of their coloring, resulting in a higher risk of eye injury, and
- 3) a serious dry eye entails a reduced amount of tears, resulting in contact lenses sticking to the eyes.

Contact lenses can be purchased without a physician's prescription, but the NCAC advises consumers to see an ophthalmologist before purchase.

- **Internet Users Get High-charge Bills**

A quick rise is noted in the number of Internet users reporting that they have received information charges from pay information service providers they do not remember using and bills for international telephone charges. The number of such reports was 188 in fiscal 1998, and went up to 936 in fiscal '99, and went rapidly up to 1,745 midway during fiscal 2000.

The cause of the trouble is that, while these people were using the Internet, their PCs received software designed to connect them to a pay information service provider other than the provider they have a contract with or international telephone calls, before they know what was happening. The average bill amount is

65,000 yen (590 dollars). One person even received a bill for 1.2 million yen (11,000 dollars). Many of these international phone calls are addressed to St. Helena, the Republic of Seychelles, Dominican Republic, and Anguilla.

To prevent these problems occurring, the responsibility of telephone companies is heavy, but consumers should also take care.

- **Burn Injuries with Steam Humidifiers**

Humidifiers are spreading quickly, in the belief that they maintain a comfortable humidity in rooms that tend to get too dry due to air-conditioners or electric heaters and that such humidifiers effectively prevent influenza. Ultrasonic humidifiers spread temporarily but they were found to generate germs and white powdered chlorine based substances that stuck to walls and other surfaces. These days, therefore, steam humidifiers have become mainstream.

However, steam humidifiers are causing accidents especially among children who get burned by either touching the steam jets, or knocking over the humidifier resulting in hot water spillage. Although the accidents are small in number, many of them are serious cases. The NCAC is therefore urging consumers to be on guard.

For example, a ten-year-old girl got burned, resulting in the inability to stretch her fingers. An operation was performed to graft skin, and the treatment took eight months to complete. Many burns due to humidifier steam turn into serious burns. Having tested four humidifiers that caused these accidents, we found that their steam temperatures were close to 100°C at the

jet outlet. We also found that, when the humidifiers were knocked down, most of the water in the humidifiers spilled out. The NCAC is urging manufacturers to inform consumers of these potential hazards and develop safer products.