Women at the Helm in Academia and Health in the Asia-Pacific Region

The Asia-Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health (APACPH) has a new President, Professor Tomiko Hokama, Dean of the Graduate School of Health Sciences at The University of the Ryukyus, Okinawa, Japan. The nomination took place at the 41st annual general meeting of APACPH, held at the Taipei Medical University, Taiwan in December 2009. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of APACPH, we welcome Professor Hokama as the first woman president of APACPH, although one of the cofounders of APACPH was Professor Emeritus Jane Baltazer from the College of Public Health at the University of the Philippines, Manila in 1984.1

Indeed, there have been very few women who have run or are running public health, medical schools, or universities in this region. Women on the whole, have generally been sidelined when it comes to promotion or acquiring leadership roles. They often faced discrimination and prejudices in the workplace. Women in leadership roles face challenges to survive in male-dominated societies. However, there is no shortage of capable women in these fields and opportunities do exist. Here, we can only mention a few of the women who have been leaders in the Asia-Pacific region, and who have contributed to the recent advancement of public health, medicine, and education.

Professor Tomiko Hokama has been the Dean of the Graduate School of Health Sciences at the University of the Ryukyus, Okinawa since 2004, and she has shaped her Graduate School to be what it is today in terms of global health networking with other APACPH member institutions and international agencies. She has been prominent in promoting child health in her country and in the Asia and Pacific region. She has served in other management roles at her university and in other governmental agencies. As a pediatrician, she is passionate about promoting quality in health care services and child health.2 With her leadership, APACPH will continue to grow and contribute to the development of public health in this region.

Another Japanese woman who deserves credit for her endless efforts and links with APACPH is Professor Yoshiko Kagawa, President of the Kagawa Nutrition University, Saitama, Tokyo. As a specialist in home economics and nutrition, she started the nutrition clinic in her university, founded by her mother. Her research work in nutritional science led her to establish the “Four Group Scoring Method,” which is commonly known as the Kagawa Nutrition University Diet (KNU Diet).3,4 She is widely acknowledged as a leader in nutrition and dietetics in Japan and in recognition of her tremendous work, APACPH conferred her the APACPH Public Health Recognition Award in 2007.5

Professor Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin has been the Vice Chancellor of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the National University of Malaysia, since 2006, the first woman vice chancellor of the university. She is a professor of medical education and is recognized internationally as an expert in medical education and has worked with many international agencies. Among the many achievements and awards she has won are the “Fred Katz Medal” for promoting medical education in developing countries and the