

The Current Status of the Baby Box in Japan and Problems Related Thereto

Takeshi Hasuda, Jikei Hospital

A series of abandonments of newborn babies in Kumamoto triggered the opening of the only Baby Box in Japan, called the “the Stork’s Cradle” (hereafter referred to as “the Cradle”) in 2007. More than 130 children have been placed in the Cradle over the last decade. The reasons behind mothers giving up their children include, for example, pregnancy outside of wedlock, poverty, adultery, opposition from the mother’s family, and issues with the mother’s partner. Children left in the Cradle are placed under the protection of Kumamoto City Child Consultation Center, where the treatment of the child is determined. Of the 130 children left in the Cradle, 23 were given back to their biological family or relatives; 26 were adopted by foster parents; 47 were adopted as a special adoption; and 28 were sent to a facility such as an infant home.

There have been criticisms made against the Cradle, such as, “It could encourage child negligence without enough consideration,” “It infringes on the children’s right to know their origin,” and “It could cause an increase in the number people giving birth alone, which is very dangerous.” However, critics have not yet proposed an alternative system for the Cradle so as to prevent child abandonment and infanticide.

Our data shows a decline in the number of babies being left in the Cradle, with only five babies left in there in 2016. This is thought to be the result of reduced social recognition of the Cradle and the comparatively remote location of Kumamoto, being as it is in southwest Japan, far away from many other prefectures.

We also deal with other problems. For example, 1. Although we wish to hand babies over to foster parents at the early stage in order to allow the child to build affection for the foster parents, most babies are currently taken care of at the orphanage; 2. The scarceness of information available regarding the nursing situation of babies left in the Cradle makes it difficult for people to verify the pros and cons of the Baby Box; and 3. We are shouldering running costs of around 15 million JPY per year to keep the Cradle open.

In Japan, there are around 180,000 cases of abortion and between 27 and 66 cases of announced child abandonment per annum. If we include children who were murdered or abandoned in secret, the sum is presumed to be between 100 and 300 people per year. Even though the government still declines to become involved with the Cradle, and even though social interest in the Cradle is decreasing, we will continue to strive for the further utilization of the Cradle in order to eliminate cases of child abandonment and infanticide.