

# THE LANCET

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“There remains a lack of sensible political discourse, with Australian politicians... still avoiding the underlying issue of the fossil fuel industry’s stronghold there...the continuing damage that this does to Australia’s human and planetary health is in plain and tragic sight.”

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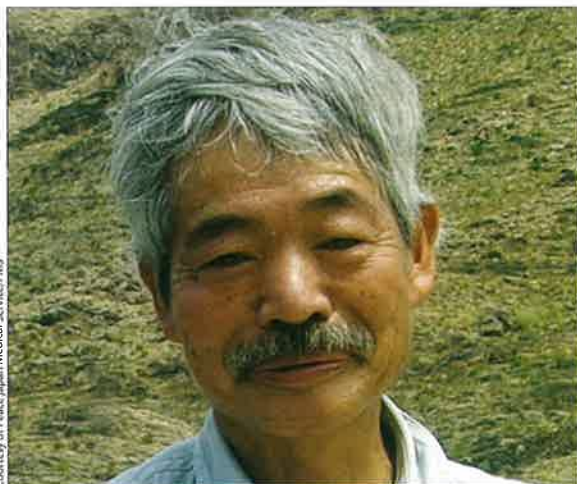
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Courtesy of Peace Japan Medical Service/PMS

## Tetsu Nakamura

Japanese physician and humanitarian. Born in Fukuoka, Japan, on Sept 15, 1946, he died after being shot in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, on Dec 4, 2019, aged 73 years.

Tetsu Nakamura wanted to do as much good as possible. Trained in neurology in Japan, he left that career to do humanitarian work in northern Pakistan. When he realised that many of his patients were refugees from neighbouring Afghanistan, he expanded his work to that country. And then he moved away from medicine when he recognised that he could help more people by giving them access to clean water. Ultimately, he helped build canals in eastern Afghanistan that have assisted nearly a million people. "His style was to focus on what the most important thing is", said Koichiro Watanabe, the Vice President of Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan, and one of the original organisers of Peshawar-kai, the Japanese organisation that helped support Nakamura's work through his aid agency Peace Japan Medical Service (PMS). "His mind was on what was most important for the patient or local people or poor people. He was never thinking about himself."

Nakamura graduated from Kyushu University School of Medicine in 1973. He travelled to Afghanistan for the first time 5 years later, hoping to see a rare butterfly. While there, he was overwhelmed by the medical needs he saw and so returned to the region. The Japan Overseas Christian Medical Cooperative Service placed him at a hospital in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1984 to help treat patients with leprosy and refugees fleeing the Soviet-Afghan war in Afghanistan.

Watanabe met Nakamura in 1983, when he was in Japan looking for people to help him expand his work. Watanabe was among a group of young people who were impressed by Nakamura's mission. To support him they created

Peshawar-kai and organised fundraisers and sought other support. In the late 1980s, Watanabe went to Peshawar and saw Nakamura's work with leprosy patients first-hand. One problem for those patients was that they were often barefoot and didn't feel injuries to their feet. Nakamura began experimenting with developing slippers to help prevent future injuries. "Of course, he was doing many operations, many things, but he realised the best use of his time was focusing on what kind of slippers are very good for them at the time", Watanabe said.

Etsuko Kita also met Nakamura in the late 1980s in Peshawar, where she was stationed at the UNICEF office. Kita, who is now the Chairperson of the Sasakawa Health Foundation in Tokyo, Japan, said Nakamura recognised many of his patents were coming from Afghanistan and, despite the personal risk, believed he could make a greater impact if he was able to work in both countries. For Nakamura and his wife, Naoko, "working in a safe town in Japan or a dangerous conflict area in Pakistan or Afghanistan...I believe there was no difference. Whatever happened to them, they wanted to do their best", said Kita. PMS eventually opened ten clinics across Afghanistan and Pakistan, although most closed after the USA launched a war to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001. The focus of PMS had started to shift by then, though. When a drought hit eastern Afghanistan in 2000, Nakamura realised the importance of getting clean water to people. "He had seen patients with tuberculosis and leprosy, but there are also many people who are in poverty, who are in need of food", recalled Chiharu Kubo, the President of Kyushu University and a medical school classmate of Nakamura's. "He saw hunger cannot be cured with medicine, which is the reason he started working on irrigation." Nakamura's efforts led to the creation of the Marwarid Canal in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. Shahmahmood Miakhel, the Governor of Nangarhar province, told *The Lancet* he drove past the canal every day on his way to a previous job, "and we were all in the car praising his work. These canals will stay forever and he will be remembered forever." Nakamura was travelling to a work site in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, when he was attacked by unknown gunmen; five Afghans were also killed in the attack.

Nakamura, who was University Professor at Kyushu University's Institute for Advanced Study, received many honours for his work, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2003 and Japan's Order of the Rising Sun in 2016. In 2019, in recognition of his contributions and to make it easier for Nakamura to continue to work in the country, Miakhel arranged for him to be named an honorary Afghan citizen by President Ashraf Ghani. "He was so very gentle, very quiet, very modest, and very humble", Kita said. "That he could achieve such an incredible impact is so impressive." In addition to his wife Naoko, Nakamura is survived by his daughters, Akiko, Michi, and Sachi, and a son, Ken.

Andrew Green