ABSTRACT. The present article is concerned with some of the human factors involved when overtime and overwork become part of the regular and accepted pattern of work, with sometimes tragic results. While the "economic miracle" of Japan can be much admired, it has not been without human cost. Only recently, national and global attention is being focused on a new and deadly phenomenon in Japan: Karoushi, which the Japanese define as "death from overwork," and which I choose to re-define as "stress-death" related to feelings of helplessness.

It is my tentative hypothesis that karoushi is not directly caused by overwork, as popularly assumed. Rather, I believe that overwork is only one factor, and that stress-death is actually caused by the cumulative, long-range effects of working in a situation where one feels trapped and powerless to effect any change for the better, which in turn leads to attitudes of hopelessness — attitudes which are exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, by environmental and managerial factors.

Preliminary remarks

For almost thirty years I have been fascinated by mind-body interaction — that is, the way in which a human being's mental processes interact and affect physical processes and conditions — and vice versa. The mental aspects include such things as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, reactions, attention, intentions, etc., and the physical aspects include muscle tension, chemical balance, brain states, organ function, bodily wear-and-tear, function of the immune system, bodily homeostasis and health, etc. The technical name given to this area of research and practice is Psychosomatics.

My special interest is in stress management, and for many years I worked with patients suffering from various stress-related disorders, and it became clear to me that the working environment — and their reaction to it — was contributing significantly to their distress. Central to the psychosomatic approach is the idea that "stress" isn't something which is external to us, "out there" beyond our control, but is due to our reaction to stressful things in our working and living environment (technically called "stressors"). The implication is clear: if we can learn to control our reactions, we will also be able to control our stress. But if we can't or don't learn how to do that, our reactions can make us sick — yes, can even kill us.

Even since 1971, when I started working with patients with stress-related disorders (as a clinical professor in psychiatry) — and especially since I was myself a patient suffering from stress-related disorders — I have been preoccupied with the question of mental causality: the question of how and why our mental activity (and especially our reaction to stressful events) actually causes physical problems, and even death. That there is an environmental/situational influence imposing itself on us — mentally and physically — is also clear, and serves to complicate the issue. However, feeling that we are at the mercy of our environment can lead to fatalistic — and fatal — assumptions. No matter what our situation, we must "take charge" of our life — or we may lose it!

For the purpose of this essay, I want to focus on an issue that has become a vital one in Japan these
days: Specifically, I want to present my own opinion about *karoushi*, which is a Japanese term usually translated as “sudden death from overwork,” and I want to approach it through the psychosomatic emphasis on the relationship of mental attitude to stress and its effects on mind and body. I feel the term and the phenomenon itself have not received sufficiently careful treatment in the popular press and the medical community, and want to present my own opinion about this controversial topic.

*Karoushi* is a Japanese term usually translated into English as “sudden death from overwork.” This topic is timely to economics in the global age not only because of its implications for business ethics, but because of its implications for the meaning of work — and the meaning of life itself.

On the personal level, I have long been interested in the meaning of work — how work can be meaningful (or not), how work can become play, what it means to say that work “loses its meaning,” why some people commit suicide soon after they have to retire, etc. The Japanese sage Sontoku believed that the place of work can or should be the place in which salvation and enlightenment can be found. But far from being the place where self-actualization and fulfillment can be found, work for many people is the place that robs them of the meaning of life, and, in extreme cases, even kills some of them. It seems to me that, to the extent this amount of overwork is demanded or allowed by companies, it is not only poor business practice, but questionable business ethics.

**Karoushi: A real and grave social problem**

I often read articles or reports which mention the fact that Japanese have worked long and hard to rebuild their country after the wartime devastation, and have amazed the whole world by its economic achievement, but that, paradoxically, they seem incapable of slowing down and enjoying their success. Many Japanese seem to enjoy saying that “hard work never hurt anyone,” but the growing national concern over sudden death from overwork would seem to contradict this; hard work, Japanese style, may not only hurt — it may kill.

A recent editorial in the Japan Times points out that the phenomenon first surfaced as an issue about 10 years ago, and involved mostly blue-collar workers; but today, white-collar managers in the prime of life are its frequent victims. Consider the following observations:

In the year and a half since a group of medical and legal experts set up a telephone hotline on the subject in mid-1988, more than 1300 aggrieved families that have lost their main financial support to what they believe is work-related stress have sought advice and assistance in filing claims for benefits. But the government is said to now approve benefits for only one-tenth of the claims made.

Despite campaigns for shorter hours by the government, Japanese still work from 200 to 500 more hours a year than their counterparts in Europe and America — not including the long overtime that many employers expect. Instead of paying lip service to a shorter workweek, which may be difficult to implement quickly, what the nation needs is agreement on the threat to life that extreme overwork represents — and on a realistic timetable for reducing its prevalence (*Japan Times*, 1989).

Perhaps it is time for companies and corporations globally to take this problem seriously, and carefully study its own management and employment practices to consider whether they are maintaining humane ideals for its employees. If some employees of some companies are headed for *karoushi*, then those companies may be headed for legal and ethical problems.

**Karoushi: Is it “sudden” death?**

As mentioned above, we are usually told that *karoushi* is called “sudden death,” and that it is thought to be a direct result of overwork.²

The image I get from what I have read — and as yet there are few solid statistics or studies that have been accomplished — is that it is popularly understood to be something like what can happen to an animal. For example, if an antelope is chased by a predator, it runs at full speed in complete panic until exhausted, and in some cases its heart may actually burst from the combination of physical effort and fear. This is called “emergency death” or “sympathetic death” by Seligman (1975). If we examine cases of *karoushi*, as reported in the press, it may seem on