

A Tribute To A Great Public Health Leader

Dr Jong Wook Lee

Director-General of the World Health Organization July 2003 – May 2006

The world lost a valiant and tireless worker for public health with the untimely death on May 22nd of Dr Jong Wook Lee, the first Korean to head an international agency and the sixth person to head the World Health Organization. He was a visionary public health physician who combined modesty with perseverance in everything that he did in his 61 years of life. He leaves his wife Reiko and son Tad and a global community of colleagues and friends who will miss his presence but remain rewarded by having had his life touch ours.

DHHS Secretary Mike Leavitt put it well when he noted that Dr Lee offered “visionary leadership and a cooperative spirit.” Little wonder when you consider that his experience with the public health implications of international events reached back to his early childhood. At age 5, during the Korean War, he and his mother and two brothers walked 250 miles through bitterly cold winter weather to be united with his father.

His father and one brother went into politics but his mother encouraged him to become a physician. He completed his MD degree in Korea and was enrolled in an advanced medical program when he applied to the University of Hawaii to study public health out of what he described as “Being able to do more good that way.”

It was at the University of Hawaii where I was serving as Professor of Public Health and Dean of the School of Public Health that I was privileged to begin a life long friendship with this extraordinary professional who in addition to being a serious student and researcher was an avid scuba diver who his student friends called “Ugie.”

In 1983 upon his graduation with a Masters degree in Public Health, an opportunity opened for an assignment to the Regional Office of the World Health Organization in the Nation of Fiji and the faculty at Hawaii as well as friends in the Manila WHO office urged him to apply for the posting. His interest in Leprosy and Tuberculosis and a great desire to help an undeserved population made the assignment a natural for the energetic new graduate. That was the beginning of an incredible career in service to Global Health.

In 1986 Dr Lee moved on from Fiji to head a variety of health programs including Leprosy, Tuberculosis and Polio out of the regional office of the World Health Organization in Manila. In 1990 he moved to the WHO Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland where he gained a world wide reputation as an expert in vaccination.

In 2003 Dr Le was elected by the General assembly of the World Health Organization to serve as its sixth Director General. Prior to his formal elevation as Director General which was scheduled for July of 2003, he agreed to attend the PHS Professional Meeting held that June in Scottsdale, Arizona.

On Wednesday June 18th Dr Lee made a presentation on “Global Health” to an overflow crowd of Commissioned Officers who reacted most enthusiastically to his encouraging words of a

vision for energizing collaboration between nations for the enhancement of health for all. As I listened to the presentation I wondered how many others there were like Dr. Lee that could have made the presentation in Korean, French or Japanese as well as in English.

Before leaving to return to Geneva and his formal induction ceremony he told me of his hope to see an increased number of PHS officers serving in the field of Global Health. He had earlier visited a near by Indian Reservation thanks to RADM Grimm's courtesy and was most impressed with the efforts of the officers who served there and their potential for service in the field of Global Health.

In the final accounting, success in life has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others that is worth remembering. For that reason Dr. J. W. Lee's life will remain as a blessing for all citizens of the world community.

His life's work in service to enhancement of the public's health meets the criteria set out by Robert Pine, namely; What we have done for ourselves alone, dies with us. What we have done for others and the world - remains and is immortal.

Dr. Jerrold M. Michael
RADM USPHS (Ret.)
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