



## Keun Lee (October 10, 1942 – May 14, 2024): a pioneering pediatrician in the field of developmental screening tests in Korea and a beloved teacher at Ewha Womans University College of Medicine

Su Jin Cho

Department of Pediatrics, Ewha Womans University College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea

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### Corresponding author

Su Jin Cho  
Department of Pediatrics, Ewha Womans  
University College of Medicine, 1071,  
Anyangcheon-ro, Yangcheon-gu, Seoul  
07985, Korea  
E-mail: [sujin-cho@ewha.ac.kr](mailto:sujin-cho@ewha.ac.kr)



**Fig. 1.** Photo of the late Dr. Keun Lee  
(courtesy of her family).

It is with profound sadness that we announce the passing of Dr. Keun Lee (Fig. 1), a trailblazer in pediatric developmental screening, a staunch advocate for breastfeeding, and a cherished medical educator. Dr. Lee passed away on May 14, 2024, in Fullerton, California, USA, at the age of 81, after a seven-year battle with vascular dementia, which developed following a stroke in 2017.

### Early life and education

Dr. Lee was born on October 10, 1942, in Seoul, Korea, as the second child and only daughter in a family of six children. She received her M.D. from Ewha Womans University College of Medicine in February 1967. She pursued further medical training in the United States, completing an internship at Long Island College Hospital in New York from 1967 to 1968, followed by residencies at the University of Iowa Hospital from 1968 to 1969 and at Vanderbilt University Hospital from 1970 to 1971. In 1972, she achieved board certification in pediatrics in the United States and completed a fellowship at New York University Hospital from 1972 to 1974. She obtained her Ph.D. in Medicine from Seoul National University in 1981.

### Professional achievements

In March 1976, Dr. Lee began her tenure as a professor at Ewha Womans University College

of Medicine, where she served until February 2008 before being named an emeritus professor. Her most notable contribution was the introduction of developmental screening tests for children in Korea. In 1987, she introduced the Denver Developmental Screening Test to Korea, providing pediatricians with a tool to directly observe and assess the developmental progress of children [1]. Her landmark study, which involved 2,144 children, demonstrated that the behavioral development of Korean children often exceeded that of their counterparts in the United States and Japan. The findings of this study were also featured in a newspaper — Korean children's behavioral development is faster than that of children in the United States and Japan. Newspaper, DongA Ilbo, November 7, 1986.

Over the years, Dr. Lee made significant contributions to several areas of pediatrics. In 1989, she conducted research on asthma severity using the Child Symptom Checklist and DSM-III Axis levels [2]. By 1991, she had developed a language development screening method for Korean children aged 0 to 3 years, designed for use by pediatricians without the need for specialized training [3]. In 1999, she highlighted the importance of integrating parental concerns into developmental screenings during immunization visits [4]. Her study in 2000 resulted in the creation of a user-friendly developmental screening test tailored for pediatricians [5]. In 2002, she introduced the Ewha Infant Development Screening Test (EDST) for infants aged 1 to 48 months [6]. These accomplishments established the groundwork for the Ewha Birth and Growth Study [7], positioning the Ewha Womans University College of Medicine as a leader in cohort research in the field of pediatrics.

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## Leadership and advocacy

Dr. Lee held several prominent positions, including:

- President of the Korean Society of Medical Education (1997–1999)

- President of the Korean Pediatric Society (2003)

- Founding President of the Korean Society of Breastfeeding Medicine (2006–2008)

In 2007, she played a pivotal role in changing the term “pediatrics” [소아과학] to “pediatrics and adolescent medicine” [소아청소년의학], reflecting a broader commitment to child and adolescent health. She was also a vocal advocate for breastfeeding, meticulously organizing relevant information and teaching how to provide breastfeeding counseling.

Emphasizing that breastfeeding is a fundamental right of newborns, she highlighted its advantages and importance. As the inaugural president of the Korean Society of Breastfeeding Medicine from 2006 to 2008, she addressed the benefits and significance of breastfeeding from an academic perspective, promoting it in terms that were easily understandable to mothers.

From 1992 to 1996, she served as a committee member on the UNICEF Korea Committee's initiative to establish baby-friendly hospitals and was later the chairperson from 1997 to 2004. Through her leadership, she played a pivotal role in the development of baby-friendly hospitals in our country. Following her retirement, she managed the Ewha Infant and Child Health Counseling Center from March 2008 to January 2010.

Dr. Lee expressed concerns in various media outlets about adopting American-style parenting practices. She emphasized the importance of the first year of life for a child, stating, “During the first year of life, it's crucial for a child to form basic trust correctly with the primary caregiver to foster harmonious relationships in the future. Neglecting a child's needs too early under the guise of promoting independence may lead the child to unconsciously harbor distrust” [8]. In addition to her media appearances, she has been an active writer for the general public. Her

publications include *To the Overwhelmed Mothers* in 1989 [9], *Smart Mothers Raise Their Children with Breast Milk* in 2003 [10], and *Raise Your Child Like a Kangaroo: 111 Questions and Answers from the Child Growth Clinic* in 2010 [11].

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## Personal reflections

As a student in 1994, I vividly recall Dr. Lee's charismatic presence during our first pediatrics lecture. She captivated us for two hours without the aid of slides or handouts, vividly bringing the subject to life by mimicking various breath sounds—wheezing, stridor, grunting—as if she were performing in an opera. Her innovative teaching methods made a lasting impression on all of us. Starting my residency in 1998, I observed Dr. Lee's unique approach to admitting patients by listing symptoms rather than diagnoses. This method compelled us to consult textbooks, collaborate on diagnostic plans, and engage deeply in research, providing invaluable experience in diagnosing rare syndromes. Dr. Lee was fearless and formidable when necessary, a strong woman who made significant scholarly and public contributions. Yet, to me and many others, she was also a warm and genuine mentor. Her smile was always gentle, tinged with playfulness, making her someone with whom we could discuss anything.

Dr. Lee passed away in the United States, where she was lovingly cared for by her family throughout her illness. She is survived by her three sons, three daughters-in-law, four grandsons, and two granddaughters. Her legacy continues to inspire not only those who had the privilege of knowing her but also countless others who have been impacted by her work.

We remember and will long cherish the legacy of our esteemed teacher, Dr. Keun Lee. Her contributions have left an indelible mark on pediatrics and medical education in Korea. Her dedication to her patients, students, and the field of pediatrics will continue to influence and inspire future generations.

### ORCID

Su Jin Cho: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3851-9073>

### Authors' contributions

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