

Life as a pediatrician in the United States: an interview with Dr. Jeong-Ok A. Lee

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Jeong-Ok A. Lee, M.D.(안정옥) is a distinguished graduate of the Ewha Womans University College of Medicine in 1973 who has worked as a pediatrician in the United States since 1975. The interview with Dr. Lee was conducted online on September 30, 2025 (Fig. 1). Here, we will share the story of Dr. Lee's life as a Korean physician in the United States, along with her thoughtful and heartfelt advice for future generations of doctors.

Ewha Medical Journal (EMJ): Hello, Dr. Jeong-Ok A. Lee. Thank you so much for joining us for this interview. It is truly an honor to have this time with you, and I believe your insights will inspire and encourage our readers. To start, let's talk about your early experiences settling in the United States and life as a physician. Could you share what motivated you to move to the United States and start practicing medicine there?

Dr. Jeong-Ok A. Lee (Dr. Lee): I was in pediatrics, and back then in Korea, pediatrics wasn't very developed. I thought if I went to the United States, I could learn more and teach future generations. My husband had graduated from law school, so he also wanted to study law further in the United States. These were the 2 main reasons we decided to move.

EMJ: How did you overcome language barriers as a doctor in the United States?

Dr. Lee: Honestly, I didn't have time to study English separately. I went straight into my internship, working around 80 hours a week. The more I worked and the less I slept, the more I picked up. It was a matter of survival, and I learned on the job. After residency, when I finally had more time, I realized communication was just as important as medical knowledge. That's when I started taking classes and practicing, and my English improved over time.

EMJ: What were the most challenging and rewarding moments

during your internship and residency in the United States?

Dr. Lee: The most difficult part was the physical demand. Americans tend to be bigger, and I'm small, so keeping up was tough. It was even harder when I had a baby while working 80 hours a week as a resident—I wondered if I could manage it all. But making it through residency gave me a deep sense of accomplishment. I realized that strength and stamina are just as important as skills.

EMJ: Could you share a memorable case and what you learned from it?

Dr. Lee: I completed a 2-year pediatric hematology-oncology fellowship after finishing my pediatrics residency. Back then, acute lymphoblastic leukemia was very common, with survival rates of about 50% compared to 80%–90% today. One 10-year-old patient relapsed a second time. Since the relapse was dangerous and we had little more to offer, we were preparing to stop treatment. But he said, "I survived the first relapse, and I'll survive this one too. Don't ever give up on me." Hearing that from a child shocked me. It taught me that doctors should never give up before their patients do, as patients often hold on to hope until the very end.

EMJ: Do you have any special experience as a Korean doctor?

Dr. Lee: I work in the Korean community. About half of our patients are Korean, and I treat them as if they were my own children. I want to help them grow into leaders while keeping their cultural roots. In our office, we guide kids not just medically, but also in life—teaching them how to be responsible adults and leaders. For those preparing for medical school, we help them gain the experiences they need and get good recommendations from our hospital.

EMJ: How did you balance family time and leisure with your

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Received: October 2, 2025 Revised: October 9, 2025 Accepted: October 10, 2025



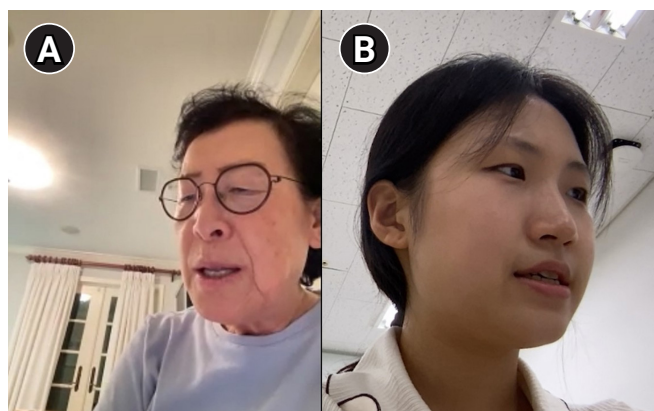


Fig. 1. Screenshot during a Zoom interview conducted on September 30, 2025. (A) Jeong-Ok A. Lee, M.D.(안정옥), graduate of the Ewha Womans University College of Medicine in 1973. (B) Student reporter Seohwa Jung.

medical career?

Dr. Lee: Raising children is a big responsibility as a mother. I tried to take them on trips whenever I could, but later they told me what mattered more wasn't those few trips a year—it was the time I spent with them every day. I think this holds true in Korea too, as Korean society tends to place additional expectations on female doctors in their role as mothers.

EMJ: Having learned about your life in the United States, we would now like to focus on your professional growth and the values you hold as a physician. What motivated you to pursue your current path in medicine?

Dr. Lee: I've always loved children. Being the fifth of 9 siblings, I saw how much it hurt when kids were sick and wanted to help. With several doctors in my family, I thought, "If they can do it, so can I." Growing up in a large family naturally led me to a career in pediatrics.

EMJ: What do you think was the most important factor in becoming recognized as a top expert in your field?

Dr. Lee: At Ewha, I learned that achieving goals requires giving your utmost effort. My faith also guides me—I believe that if God gives me work, He will provide support. Combining faith with Ewha's values, I've always tried my best in everything, from studying to building stamina. Without that dedication, reaching this point wouldn't have been possible.

EMJ: Were there any people or experiences that shaped your values or beliefs as a doctor?

Dr. Lee: Jesus has been the greatest influence on me. Growing up in a Christian family, I learned He came to teach, heal, and spread the gospel, which inspired me to do my best for every patient. Even when outcomes are not perfect, my faith sustains me with hope and humility. If a patient recovers well, I see it as God's

work, not my own, which keeps me humble. Following Jesus has been my greatest source of strength as a doctor.

EMJ: How do you think the roles or qualities required of doctors have changed over time?

Dr. Lee: In the past, doctors mainly told patients what to do. Today, it's more about guidance and respect. Giving patients options helps them feel some control over their health, which is crucial—except in life-threatening situations.

EMJ: How have you dealt with ethical conflicts in clinical practice?

Dr. Lee: Ethical challenges, such as issues with vaccine management, sometimes tempted us to take shortcuts. I've learned that honesty and addressing problems directly are always better in the long run. Mistakes happen, and admitting them is part of being a responsible doctor. My faith helps me stay humble and handle challenges with integrity.

EMJ: How have alumni activities or interactions with the Korean community influenced your career and life?

Dr. Lee: Being connected to alumni and the Korean community has been invaluable. In LA, we support and encourage each other, which helps us grow as doctors and as individuals. The network strengthens both our professional and personal lives.

EMJ: What has been the greatest meaning of being a doctor over the years?

Dr. Lee: In pediatrics, our goal isn't just treating illness—it's helping children grow into healthy, capable adults, maximizing their physical, emotional, and spiritual potential. Supporting a child from birth to adulthood and watching them thrive is the greatest meaning of my work.

EMJ: What principles do you emphasize when mentoring young doctors?

Dr. Lee: When mentoring students, I emphasize cooperation over competition. They should discover and nurture each other's strengths and support one another's growth. Once they enter medical school and residency, they need to fully commit to mastering their specialty. Physical stamina, faith, and a strong support network are essential for success. Students should enjoy some leisure during their school years, but once in residency, it's all about dedication.

EMJ: Thank you for sharing your insights on your career. Let's now move on to the messages you would like to share with the next generation of doctors. What message would you like to deliver to current Ewha Womans University students?

Dr. Lee: Enjoy your undergraduate years—have fun, build skills, strengthen your faith, and gain diverse experiences. Make friends, encourage one another, and help each other discover strengths. For example, someone with strong hands-on skills

might thrive in surgery, while those who think deeply and carefully might do well in internal medicine or pediatrics. Once in residency, give your absolute best—study hard, conduct research, and gain experience.

EMJ: In today's rapidly advancing medical field, what core competencies should future doctors have?

Dr. Lee: Future doctors must keep up with advances as they happen. AI and genetics are rapidly revealing new diseases, and in the United States, artificial intelligence (AI) can now do in a year what used to take a decade. Young doctors should be ready to explore these fields and adapt quickly, even in pediatrics, where AI is beginning to be applied to patient care.

EMJ: What should students do now if they want to compete on the international stage?

Dr. Lee: To compete globally, you must study hard and gain research experience now. Being a top professional requires preparation and dedication from the start.

EMJ: How can young doctors overcome challenging periods in their careers?

Dr. Lee: Always remember why you became a doctor. Reflect on your purpose and mission. If you lose sight of it, you may falter. Difficulties are opportunities for growth—use them to strengthen your skills and resolve.

EMJ: Finally, what life wisdom would you like to share with your juniors, as both a doctor and a mentor?

Dr. Lee: Medicine is about doing your absolute best for patients—making accurate diagnoses, providing the right treatments, and preventing disease. I hope our junior doctors begin with prayer, drawing strength and guidance from God, and then care for their patients with compassion, humanity, and dedication.

Dr. Lee's sincere story revealed not only her warmth and deep sense of responsibility toward her young patients but also her thoughtful guidance for junior doctors. Through her experiences, I gained a deeper understanding of what it means to live and work

as a Korean pediatrician in the United States. Listening to her story made me reflect on the values and mindset a doctor should embody. As a pre-med student, it also encouraged me to think more deeply about the kind of doctor I aspire to become. I will keep her words close to my heart and commit myself to putting them into practice, starting now.

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Authors' contribution

All the work was done by Seohwa Jung.

Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Funding

None.

Data availability

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments

The author extends heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Jeong-Ok A. Lee for graciously sharing her time, experiences, and wisdom.

Supplementary materials

None.

References

None.