

Dr Lee has hosted numerous public medical education campaigns ranging from radio shows to television (photos courtesy of Dr Lee)



Duty and excellence—An interview with Dr Kin-hung Lee

by: William Xue¹, Brian PH Leung²

¹ Year 4 (MB ChB), The Chinese University of Hong Kong

² MB ChB, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

As co-author of the first local obstetrics and gynaecology textbook and as a professor at the University of Hong Kong, Dr Kin-hung Lee was a pioneer in the field. His years of commitment to the then Hong Kong Chinese Medical Association (now the Hong Kong Medical Association) led him to be appointed Honorary Secretary before being elected President in 1994—a position he held until 1998. From 2000 to 2003, Dr Lee served as Chairman of the Medical Council of Hong Kong. Despite these achievements, you might still be surprised at how well-recognised his name, voice, and appearance are outside the field of medicine. From 1986, Dr Lee hosted the television programme “Doctor and You” for more than a decade. The series was aired on Radio Television Hong Kong, and promoted health to the millions in the city. He was probably the first doctor to appear on local television, and his regular appearances earned him the nickname “the TV Doctor”.

It is fair to comment that Dr Lee has been successful in most, if not all, of his identities. Yet beyond all the titles and recognition, what he values most is his identity as a practising doctor who safeguards the well-being of his patients.

Entering the public eye

After graduating from medical school in 1958, Dr Lee started his career with an internship at Tsan Yuk Hospital, and subsequently chose to specialise in obstetrics and gynaecology. While practising in the public health care system, he also tried his very best to improve practices within the field. He started teaching, and joined the University of Hong

Kong as a Senior Lecturer in 1968, subsequently earning an MD in 1971 with a practice-changing thesis. In view of the lack of proper obstetrics and gynaecology teaching for staff in the public sector, he joined Professor Daphne Chun, the then head of the obstetrics and gynaecology department at the University of Hong Kong, to publish *Practical Obstetrics*, a bilingual textbook that has been highly celebrated by midwives and students. The book explained the state-of-the-art practice in Chinese, allowing a wider demography to comprehend and adopt better practices.

Later, in 1976, Dr Lee left the public sector to open his own private clinic. Although he devoted himself to private obstetric practice, he remained active in the world of academia. He continued giving lectures to midwives and medical students at the University of Hong Kong, while volunteering in the different committees within the then Chinese Medical Association (now the Hong Kong Medical Association). He began as a committee member, eventually getting involved in public health education. After years of commitment, he was elected President of the Hong Kong Medical Association in 1994 and was awarded the title of Honorary Clinical Assistant Professor in 1998. Dr Lee certainly established himself among medical professionals as a leader and advocate of the profession. Yet, he is even more recognised by the general public. In view of progression of the mass media, the Chinese Medical Association began various public medical education campaigns in the 1970s. Dr Lee started hosting radio shows and answering phone calls, later starring on television and addressing questions from

a live audience while being broadcast to the millions in the city. It is not only Dr Lee's achievements that are recognised, but also his kind, amiable voice and face.

An advocate

Medical education campaigns in earlier years involved only print media. Dr Lee would write a short anonymous newspaper article on behalf of the Chinese Medical Association, answering the hundreds of letters received by the Association. Due to the limited space on paper, Dr Lee could address only the most important issues of public health education, such as prevalent infectious diseases and maternal-child health. He introduced Western evidence-based medicine to the general public who were, at that time, more accustomed to conventional non-scientific health practices. As Hong Kong prospered, the use of modern media in medical education also evolved. Live radio phone-in programmes hosted by Dr Lee became popular, as did the famous television series, "Doctor and You". Dr Lee admits that such public appearances were challenging, due to the immense pressure of representing the whole medical community. Strict codes of practice existed at the time that disapproved of practising doctors appearing in public media. Practising doctors were barred from revealing their identity to prevent commercial promotion of their own business. The code of professionalism still does not permit self-promotion by doctors, although individual efforts to promote health education and public interests are now publicised and recognised.

To Dr Lee, hosting a television show was no harder than seeing patients, despite representing the entire medical community when responding to enquiries. Dr Lee says, "I have always been self-conscious and confident in becoming more-or-less the official spokesman for the Hong Kong Medical Association, instead of merely an individual going on television. Doctors shall always be obligated to and respect their patients, the profession and their conscience". Dr Lee has always been proud to assume such duties, to always tell the unbiased truth and educate the public, both in the media and in real life, and continues to preach and practise his beliefs today.

Over the years as a media figurehead of the profession, Dr Lee points out the differences between responding to questions in public media and those encountered in his daily practice. Frequently asked questions were usually from individuals who were worried about their symptoms or diagnosis, similar to medical students whose advice is sought by relatives and friends. The audience on the show often wanted to know about the severity, prognosis, and treatment of their condition. Dr Lee emphasises that he would discuss only common symptoms and

always encourage the individual to visit a clinic. Although he would happily give a differential diagnosis and prescribe treatment plans after thoroughly evaluating a patient in his practice, these were not the responsibilities of a guest television host who has barely met the patient, let alone examined them. A copycat effect could mislead viewers at home with similar concerns who might then treat themselves accordingly. A brief exchange on television is insufficient to formulate a complete picture of a patient's condition. Suspicious findings could be missed while overdiagnosis would create unnecessary concern. Instead of just answering questions about medical conditions, his aim was to promote health awareness and establish healthy lifestyles among the general public. Over the years, Dr Lee and his peers have successfully built a trustworthy and responsible image for the medical community.

Witnessing change

A lot has changed during Dr Lee's 60 years of practice, particularly the interaction between doctors and patients. It is widely acknowledged today that the patient's rights and autonomy are emphasised more when making medical decisions. Where the doctor used to have the final say, today the doctor explains that he is making a professional recommendation about care and it is for the patient to make the final decision. Patients are now more aware of their rights and freedoms, from consultation to treatment. Although this has certainly led to mutual respect between the doctor and the patient it has also led to escalated debates over medico-legal issues. Here, Dr Lee reminds us that the practising medicine involves the art of communication, joking that "If the patient likes you, he won't sue you." Of course, doctors ought to be alert and do their best, but to err is human; errors are simply unavoidable. Yet, whether conflicts are resolved inside or outside a courtroom depends on how they are handled.

Although doctors are no longer the sole authority in the modern patient–doctor relationship, Dr Lee believes that doctors should still uphold the same values and ethics by providing adequate but not redundant services. Patients may complain of an array of symptoms, but it is the doctor's duty to exercise their professional judgement. Although patients may visit with a hidden agenda, Dr Lee says he would never entertain unreasonable requests. For example, a patient with a mild cold ought not be given a week's sick leave, nor submit a massive insurance claim. Doctors should always be alert to potential fraudulent behaviour. Hence, Dr Lee would always ask himself whether his medical decision would be supported by his peers and act according to his conscience. In an era in which more information is available and people are more than ever aware of

their rights, Dr Lee advises doctors not to forget to protect themselves. Although he tries to maintain a friendly attitude towards his patients, he is always conscious of the legal aspects of his practice and what is deemed appropriate by the profession and the court.

A word to youth

Looking back over the past decades, it is easy to appreciate Dr Lee's achievements, within both the profession and the community. Instead of publicising his success, Dr Lee always pays tribute to his predecessors and the people around him who have supported, taught, and worked with him. He is particularly thankful to the seniors who gave him the chance to work in the Hong Kong Medical Association and the Medical Council on public health education. He believes that it is vital to remain

humble and appreciate one's limits. As one who has worked for a long period in professional bodies, he is also very glad to see younger doctors speaking up and implementing positive changes in the public sector.

A public figure for decades, Dr Lee has never ceased to advocate for public health awareness, neither has he neglected his clinical practice. It is only his advancing age that prevents him from seeing more patients, acknowledging his limits and prioritising his patients' safety. At the age of 83, he finally retired from his clinic since the building in which it is housed will soon undergo redevelopment. "I have had good health, but I guess it's finally time for me to grab some rest with my dear wife," Dr Lee concluded candidly. A pioneer of the profession, and more importantly, a man who practises self-consciousness and duty. Thank you, Dr Lee, and may the many years ahead bring you great joy!



Group photo of Dr Lee (middle) with student reporters, William (left) and Brian (right)