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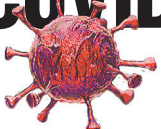
# OPEN AT HER OWN RISK

Edgemont's Dr. Joon Lee integrates COVID-19 'hospital at home' into her practice

By TODD SLISS

Dr. Hyun Joon Lee (she goes by Joon) always knew her work was important.

## Combating COVID



Second in a series

Scarsdale Integrative Medicine, at 2 Overhill Road in Scarsdale Village, offers holistic primary care, functional medicine, medical weight loss, acupuncture, nutritional counseling, menopause management,

detoxification, medical cannabis, biopuncture, IV therapy, stem cell therapy and has a gut health program.

Then COVID-19 hit close to home.

The continued services of her "complete practice" were suddenly open to interpretation as to what was permissible when New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced in March that nonessential businesses were to close and workers were to either stop working or work from home. Several thoughts crossed the 45-year-old Edgemont resident's mind: "Are we an essential business? A boutique business?"

"We have been doing holistic primary

care, so we take care of patients with their daily diabetes medication, blood pressure medication, urinary tract infections, colds, flu, all of that," Lee said. "I decided to stay open."

Among the many challenges Lee faced was some of her staff decided to stay home. Normally a crew of about 10 in the office in various roles, Lee was down to a trio, including herself, an office assistant in front and a medical staff member helping her triage in the back — and even her oldest son, Ben, a senior at Horace Mann who spent spring break helping out with non-

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# Dr. Lee

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medical duties — while two other doctors began handling functional, primary care, prescriptions and medical weight loss via telehealth from their homes.

In many ways, Lee was on her own to deal with emergencies and, of course, potential COVID-19 cases.

“I decided to test,” Lee said. “I was lucky enough to have a whole lot of nasal swabs in my practice and had all the protective gear. I don’t know how, but we had it all. I think we have it because we used to harvest stem cells and we do stem cell therapy, so we had the N95 masks, the surgical gowns — we had it all.”

That doesn’t mean she didn’t have “conflicting feelings and emotions” about her safety and the safety of her family of five. “I have a 5-year-old son — I was scared for him,” she said. “But I had all the equipment and I felt obligated to my patients to take care of them. They were panicked — they were calling me in panic... It’s a very small practice and I’m very close with my patients.”

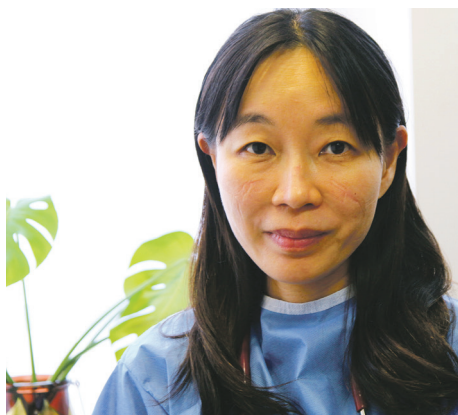
With the exception of Easter Sunday, she’s been fully quarantining herself at home. “I couldn’t stand it anymore — I needed to touch [my family], to be with them,” she said. “On Easter day I actually hung out with them. It’s lonely at times. It’s weird... I go home, I strip down, I shower and I go straight into my room. I have tested myself several times and I am not positive, but I can’t risk that for my family.”

In addition to serving her existing clientele, she’s taken on more patients whose primary care “was nowhere to be found.”

“I’m happy I made the decision to stay open,” Lee said. “I’m happy I made the decision to fight COVID and be part of it. I signed up to be a doctor in good times and bad times. I’m not supposed to be hiding.”

## Testing on site

Lee was initially conducting tests for COVID-19 in a parking lot. Patients would drive up, get tested and drive away. Others didn’t take too kindly — police were called to the scene. “Do I shut it down?” Lee wondered. “Do I not do it anymore?” She moved the operation into her office instead, creating clean rooms and making sure that proper disinfecting was taking place, the number of people allowed in at one time was reduced and personal protec-



E. FARRELL PHOTOS

Edgemont’s Dr. Joon Lee shows the marks a face mask leaves after a long day of treating patients at Scarsdale Integrative Medicine. Top, Lee looks over a report at her office at 2 Overhill Road in Scarsdale.

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*“I went from a boutique concierge functional medicine doctor to the COVID fighter in a month.”*

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— DR. JOON LEE

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tive equipment was available for staff and patients alike.

With so many swabs and test kits, patients needed to qualify with proper symptoms like any other testing facility. Of the hundreds of patients triaged as of Tuesday, April 28, Lee conducted 107 nasopharyngeal swab tests starting March 16 and 94 Rapid IgM/Ig G antibody tests since April 3. Thirty-two tested positive for the virus, while 27 were positive for having had the virus. “When rapid comes back positive we do the nasal to know if [it’s] still spreading and contagious,” Lee said. “There is some overlap in the numbers.”

Lee’s patients have mostly had mild or moderate cases with vitamin C and zinc IV treatments, but from her office and their own homes, she was also able to treat critical COVID-19 patients. “I did a lot of phone

calls to set up home oxygen tanks, to set up infusions for hydration and I sent home chest X-rays to get X-rays done and I treated them,” she said. “All from a distance. It’s really amazing. It’s very rewarding.”

Six of her patients had these “hospital at home” setups.

“None of them were hospitalized and 100 percent of the people I took care of at home recovered,” Lee said. “I’m really thankful for that. I was really scared. I’m not an intensivist, I’m not an ICU doctor, I’m not a pulmonologist. Some of them really needed a ventilator, but they were refusing to go or EMS refused to take them.”

Lee is also a founding member of KDAC (Korean American Doctors Against COVID-19), a volunteer organization of New York and New Jersey doctors who have a mission of “providing COVID-19 care for patients of all ethnicities and backgrounds.” The group set up a free drive-thru testing center in New Jersey on April 25, with 30 volunteer physicians, nurses and medical students testing 175 patients in five hours, with 36 testing positive. The next site will be Bayside, New York, on Saturday, May 2.

## Learning from afar

Lee graduated from South Korea’s Yonsei University College of Medicine in 1999 and in 2006 she completed a family medicine residency and faculty development fellowship program at Albert Einstein College of Medicine-Montefiore Medical Center in the department of family and social medicine. Since that time she’s been an assistant professor at Einstein.

Lee is board-certified by the American Board of Family Medicine, the American Board of Integrative Holistic Medicine and the American Board of Obesity Medicine and is also a member of the American Academy of Family Physicians and Institutes for Functional Medicine.

She started Scarsdale Integrative Medicine as a private practice in 2008, adding more services as the years have gone on.

Lee still has many contacts in her native country, so she was in touch with her colleagues overseas, learning firsthand what was happening in real time with coronavirus before it reached the United States. “I called them up and they let me know what Korea was doing in terms of tracing, testing and treating,” she said.

What Lee learned was how much more involved the Korean government was in the fight against COVID-19, including de-

# Dr. Lee

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veloping an app to monitor symptoms over 14 days “with constant tracing, so if you left the house they would call you and say, ‘Hey, where are you going? You’re supposed to be home.’”

Of course that won’t fly in the United States. “We were kind of free to do what we wanted,” Lee said. “In Korea people weren’t necessarily free to do what they wanted because the government had a handle on it... The United States at the moment is talking about Google and Apple providing the tracing, so it’s all the private sector controlling the whole thing, not the government.”

In addition, Korea is already accustomed to wearing masks because of pollution and the MERS outbreak from 2015. “It was already culturally accepted to be wearing masks indoors and outdoors,” Lee said. “Everybody was wearing masks and governments provided masks every week for every individual.”

That’s another major contrast to the U.S. “The culture is that masks are worn by robbers and criminals,” Lee said. “We’re not used to hiding our faces — we’re friendly, happy people who want to show our faces, right? No one wanted to wear masks even if you had one at home.”

Of course that has changed among much of the population and in April many states, including New York, mandated masks for any interaction within 6 feet or less.

“Initially a lot of infectious disease doctors and what we call experts were telling us if you’re not infected, if you’re not sick, there’s no reason to wear a mask,” Lee said. “The people who were wearing masks were considered sick people.”

Lee started giving masks to anyone entering her office starting in mid-March and when she got donations of additional masks she started mailing them out to her patients.

“I’ve been posting a lot of things on Facebook trying to change the culture about masks, about how we look at this,” she said. “I went from a boutique concierge functional medicine doctor to the COVID fighter in a month.”

May 15 remains the next target date for Cuomo’s New York State on PAUSE to end or shift gears. Many see that as unlikely, that this could continue for months before even a slow reopening of society begins.



E. FARRELL PHOTOS

Left, Lee sanitizes her PPE masks. Right, she reads a positive COVID-19 test in her office. Below, Thirty Korean medical professionals, including Dr. Joon Lee, are offering drive-thru testing sites in New York and New Jersey.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

“Nobody knows, but until we have a concrete treatment medication and a concrete vaccine that can actually tackle this virus, I think we still have to be very, very careful,” Lee said. “I think our social norm and culture will probably change forever. I don’t see us going back to hugging and handshaking and all of that.”

Working from home, telemedicine — both things many had shunned — are not

only possible, but can be done well with proper execution across the board.

“Things like that are going to change and hopefully we’re somewhat back to normal by July or August over the summer, but looking at Korea it’s still not really back to normal,” Lee said. “People are still social distancing, still wearing a mask. I think this is going to go on for a while. Universal testing has to be done.”