

Gut Check

A peek at the life of an internationally recognised endoscopist

by Maripet L. Poso

AS A CHILD, Dr Jarrod Lee dreamt of becoming an environmentalist. He didn't just want to save one tree or a turtle, mind you. He wanted to save the planet. Fast forward to the present – instead of saving the earth, the now renowned endoscopist is saving lives. Not a bad second career choice, if you ask me.

Upon graduation from medical school, the young doctor was torn about which specialty to choose. "I treasured the deep analytical skills of physicians, yet I yearned for the excitement and technical challenges found in surgery," shared Dr Lee. Then he discovered gastroenterology. "It seemed like a perfect fit, a convergence of medicine and surgery. Fundamentally, Gastroenterology is a sub-specialty of Internal Medicine and demands the analytical skills of a physician. However, endoscopy demands the technical skills expected of every surgeon."

Happy to have found his calling, Dr Lee is now a well-established endoscopist both in advanced and general endoscopy. He is the only doctor from Southeast Asia to be recognised at the prestigious Crystal Awards for endoscopic excellence. In 2011, he bagged the coveted first prize for endoscopic technique at the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy Audiovisual (ASGE AV) Award.

His advanced endoscopy techniques in Endoscopic Ultrasound are incorporated into the Learning Library, which defines the 'gold' standard for the world.

Despite his busy private practice at the Jarrod Lee Gastroenterology & Liver Clinic,

Dr Lee makes time to give back and support the public sector, performing advanced procedures for complex cases and training younger endoscopists. In his spare time, he writes and reviews for top international journals in

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gastroenterology and endoscopy.

Ezyhealth caught up with the amiable doctor, who shared with us his passion for his work, and more.

Ezyhealth: What does it take to be an internationally recognised endoscopist?

Dr Lee: Endoscopy today is such a widespread and common procedure that it is really difficult to stand out. To be internationally recognised, it is not enough to train at a renowned institution, perform a large volume of procedures, or have many years of experience. Rather, one needs to literally 'write the book', such that endoscopists from around the world want to learn your techniques to improve themselves. It is not merely about being skilled yourself, but about challenging established paradigms and raising the overall standard of the international endoscopic community.

Ezyhealth: In 2011, you won the ASGE AV Award for endoscopic technique, beating over 100 top endoscopists from over 20 countries. Please tell us more about this.

Dr Lee: The ASGE AV Award is arguably the most prestigious award in endoscopy today. Whoever wins the prize is recognised as the 'gold' standard for a particular endoscopic technique. Each year, over 100 endoscopists from around the world enter the competition to win the ultimate bragging rights in the endoscopic community. Of these, 20 entries will be selected for the final round. The judges then adopt a blinded scoring system, where each entry is objectively scored independently by judges, who do not know the doctor, institution, or his country of origin. This ensures that winners are selected solely on merit.

Ezyhealth: How did you feel about winning the award?

Dr Lee: I am the first and only doctor to date from Southeast Asia to win the award. The experience was terribly surreal, and I really did not know how to react! I remember my mentors calling me several times in the night after the results were announced. They asked me repeatedly, 'Did you win? Are we talking about the top prize? Is there some mistake?' It was mind-blowing for all of us that someone from Southeast Asia could go to the international stage and beat the big guns from USA and Europe. The reality did not sink in even after I had flown to Chicago to receive the award.

Ezyhealth: What's your typical day like at Jarrod Lee Gastroenterology & Liver Clinic?

Dr Lee: My day begins with reviewing patients in the hospital wards. Thereafter, it's a juggle between seeing patients in the clinic, attending to new hospital admissions, and performing endoscopic procedures. I return to the public sector three times per week to perform advanced endoscopy for the more complex procedures. These days tend to be even more frenetic.

After office hours, I link up with my patients either over email or

Whatsapp. I also provide 'pro bono' specialist advice to many colleagues in primary care or other specialties. I am regularly invited to give talks or write articles, with an average of four such invitations each month. These talks and article preparations consume the remainder of my wakeful hours.

Ezyhealth: What are the common cases you see/treat at your clinic?

Dr Lee: Interestingly, the common cases I see reflect my sub-specialty interests. I see many patients with common gastrointestinal symptoms, and I partner with primary care physicians to manage them at the community level. Perhaps, this reflects my passion in promoting evidence-based gastroenterology for common digestive symptoms in primary care.

As a 'next generation' endoscopist, I see patients for endoscopy at both ends of the cancer spectrum. At one end are complex cancer cases that are referred to me for very specialised advanced endoscopic procedures. At the other end are people interested in digestive cancer screening and prevention. As one of the few endoscopists trained in advanced imaging, I see people who want the latest and most accurate technology for detecting early cancers and even pre-cancerous growth.



Ezyhealth: What do you love most about your job?

Dr Lee: The best part about my job is that I deeply love my specialty. I'm passionate about gastroenterology and endoscopy, and I can't imagine doing anything else. Singapore is a cosmopolitan city, and I get to see patients from all corners of the globe. Understanding the different cultures and diets, and how they affect digestive health is really a great adventure for me.

One of the best things about my specialty is that I get to play with new toys all the time. Advanced endoscopy is heavily reliant on technology. As a fairly young discipline, the rate of technological advancement in the past few years has been exponential. There are new devices and equipment to try out every year. As a recognised endoscopist, I am often engaged by equipment companies to evaluate new devices and prototypes before they even hit the market. For really complex cases, I even get to bring in prototype equipment from overseas.

Ezyhealth: What are the most challenging endoscopy cases you've ever handled in your career so far?

Dr Lee: Advanced endoscopy in patients who have had surgery is recognised as the most technically difficult of endoscopy cases. Advanced endoscopy is already very challenging to begin with. But imagine performing these cases when the entire anatomy is dramatically altered. In addition, majority of the usual equipment cannot be used, as they are manufactured specifically for normal anatomies. Hence, handling these cases requires good technical control, along with a healthy dose of creativity and innovation. These cases have been coined 'Extreme Endoscopy'. Just like extreme sports, it's not for everyone, and many doctors think it 'crazy' to even make an attempt.

Today, digestive cancer prevention is much more sophisticated and precise. With 'next generation' endoscopic technology, we are able to go several steps further. We can advise each person on his individualised cancer risk, determine the short to medium term risk of cancer, and even take steps to mitigate the risk and prevent cancer altogether.

Ezyhealth: Are there any breakthrough endoscopy technologies that came out in the last couple of years that we should be aware of? How do we benefit from them?

Dr Lee: Advanced imaging technologies in endoscopy have only reached a mature stage in the last couple of years. I am fortunate that my sub-specialisation training in advanced endoscopy coincided with the time that these new technologies began to flourish. I believe that advanced imaging has the potential to change the paradigm of traditional endoscopy, which has remained largely unchanged these past 20 to 30 years.

Think of traditional endoscopy as looking through a video camera within a cave. We can see any item that is obviously standing within the cave. However, it is easy to miss small objects, objects camouflaged against the walls, or even hidden behind the walls. Advanced imaging is like using infrared cameras to detect camouflaged objects, or X-ray vision to see objects behind walls. Likewise, traditional endoscopy is effective for detecting obvious growths and cancers. However, advanced imaging can detect early cancers and even pre-cancerous areas that are easily missed with traditional endoscopy. This allows us to perform endoscopic removal, thus avoiding surgery altogether.

Ezyhealth: Any tips you can share with our readers on how to better manage their digestive health?

Dr Lee: Digestive symptoms are very common. At least 20% to 40% of adults experience such symptoms every year. The challenge is in knowing when to actually worry about these symptoms. To make things more complicated, digestive symptoms are unreliable in predicting serious conditions. A person suffering from significant symptoms can be equally likely to have a serious condition like cancer as a person who feels completely well! If a thorough evaluation has not been done recently, do consider seeing a doctor. As a general rule, experts recommend observing or self-medicating up to a maximum of six weeks. If the symptoms persist, one should seek proper specialist advice.

For those concerned about digestive cancers, consider seeing a gastroenterologist specialising in this niche area. Traditionally, people would see a specialist who would do a radiologic scan or endoscopic procedure, then advise that the tests are normal. Today, digestive cancer prevention is much more sophisticated and precise. With the 'next generation' endoscopic technology, we are able to go several steps further. We can advise each person on his individualised cancer risk, determine the short to medium term risk of cancer, and even take steps to mitigate the risk and prevent cancer altogether.

Cultivate good digestive habits from a young age. This will hold you in good stead as you grow older. Eat a balanced diet, take adequate fibre, drink at least 2L of water daily, and exercise regularly. This advice may sound clichéd, but it truly is the cornerstone of a healthy digestive system. eh