

Dr. Seo Se-mo, ‘eternal family doctor of Koreans in Hawaii’

Selected for his 37 years of dedicated medical service to Hawaii’s Korean community
Conducted medical research and academic activities while nurturing next generation,
also contributed to advancement of medicine in Korea



Dr. Seo Se-mo, September’s Overseas Korean of the Month

The Overseas Koreans Agency (Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup) has selected Dr. Seo Se-mo (1930-2019) as the Overseas Korean of the Month for September. Seo provided medical services to Koreans in Hawaii for 37 years and contributed to the advancement of Korean medicine through active medical research.

Seo was born in Dongnae, Busan, in 1930. After graduating from Seoul Gyeonggi Public Middle School, he entered Severance Medical College in 1948, the predecessor of Yonsei University Hospital. After graduating from Severance Medical College in 1954, he trained in the United States and Canada. He returned to Korea in 1963 and served as an assistant professor of pediatrics at the

Yonsei University College of Medicine before moving to The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, Canada, in 1966, where he earned his Ph.D. in physiology.

Practicing medicine to elevate status of Koreans

He later moved to Hawaii in 1972 and served as a professor of pediatrics at the John A. Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawaii. After establishing the Seo Se-mo Clinic in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1986, he provided medical services for 37 years, serving as the primary physician for Koreans in Hawaii and elevating their status through his medical practice.

Upon returning to Korea from the United States in 1963 to serve as an assistant professor of pediatrics at Yonsei University College of Medicine, he emphasized the necessity of patient-centered bedside education and basic medical science in clinical disease treatment. He spearheaded changes in medical education methods, alongside young professors who had completed training in the U.S. and returned home to Korea.

He also pioneered the invitation of renowned pediatric professors to host the first International Pediatric Symposium, providing an opportunity to broaden global horizons. He devoted significant efforts to advancing pediatric endocrinology, which was then an underdeveloped field. For these contributions, he received the Korean Pediatric Society Academic Award in 1966.

‘He cared for Koreans with nowhere to turn to until the very end’

While working at Shriners Children’s Hospital in Hawaii from 1977 to 1985, he provided medical volunteer services for first-generation Korean immigrants who struggled with English communication. He also personally visited underserved rural areas in Korea, bringing over 100 physically disabled children at his own expense to Hawaii so they could receive free treatment at Shriners Hospital.

The Seo Se-mo Clinic provided specialized care exclusively for Koreans every Wednesday afternoon and Saturday morning, offering free treatment to Koreans without insurance. He also held free health seminars and health classes to improve the health and quality of life for Koreans.



The Seo Se-mo Clinic in Honolulu, Hawaii, is pictured on the left. On the right is a presentation of the Peony Medal to Dr. Seo at the 2020 14th World Korean Day Meritorious Service Awards.

Donated body to medical education and gave over 1,500 medical books collected throughout his lifetime

Dr. Seo also devoted himself to medical research and nurturing the next generation. Starting in 1966, he researched “The correlation between various hormones related to calcium and magnesium metabolism” at the Research Institute of the University of Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, earning his Ph.D. in physiology from the University of Toronto in 1972.

While serving as a professor at the John A. Barnes School of Medicine at the University of Hawaii, he established the Bone Mineral Research Laboratory at Shriners Hospital for Children, researching the causes and treatments for “hormones associated with calcium and magnesium metabolism and various bone metabolic disorders.” Many renowned physicians active in Korea, including Professor Emeritus Jang Joon-seop of the Yonsei University College of Medicine, a pioneer in osteoporosis treatment in Korean orthopedics, and Professor Emeritus Kim Deok-hee of Yonsei University College of Medicine, who contributed to the development of pediatric endocrinology in Korea, studied under Seo.

Seo donated over 1,500 medical books collected throughout his lifetime to Pocheon Jungmun Medical College and contributed a significant sum to Severance Hospital at Yonsei University, his alma mater, thereby supporting the cultivation of future scholars.

He participated in preserving the history of Korean immigration by overseeing the publication of books as part of the preparatory committee for the 90th anniversary of the Korean Christian Church. In 2013, he established the nonprofit Healthforce Foundation to raise medical funds, which were utilized for volunteer Korean medical services.

Through his will, he provided a noble sacrifice for medical education, including donating his body to the University of Hawaii’s medical school for medical research after his death.

Furthermore, he was dispatched to Okinawa, Japan, from 1972 to

1974 to impart American clinical medicine to Japanese medical students. He also contributed to the East-West medical exchange by becoming the first Korean physician to lecture at the general assembly of the Japan Pediatric Society.

In the 1970s, when Kawasaki disease -- an acute vasculitis affecting children -- emerged in Japan, he invited Dr. Kawasaki to Hawaii for joint studies, laying the groundwork for Hawaii to become the U.S. hub for Kawasaki disease research. The disease’s name originates from the Japanese physician who first reported it to the global medical community in 1967.

In recognition of Seo’s achievements, the Korean government posthumously awarded him the Order of Civil Merit, Peony Medal, in 2020.

Commissioner Kim: ‘eternal family doctor of Koreans in Hawaii’

“Dr. Seo Se-mo is the eternal family doctor of Koreans in Hawaii, having devoted his life to medical research and medical service for them,” OKA Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup said. “He is selected as the Overseas Korean of the Month for September so that his dedication and spirit of sacrifice for overseas Koreans may be remembered forever by future generations.”

The OKA identifies compatriots who have contributed to the development of the Republic of Korea or enhanced the status of Koreans in their countries of residence, selecting and announcing them as the Overseas Korean of the Month each month. The previous honorees include March, Kim Pyeong-jin (1926-2007), former president of the Jeju Development Association in Japan; April, Hong Myeong-gi (1934-2021), former chairman of the M&L Hong Foundation; May, Im Cheon-taek (1903-1985), an independence activist; June, Park Byeong-heon (1928-2011), former head of the Korean Residents Union in Japan; July, Park No-hak, former president of the Return of Detained Sakhalin Koreans Association; and August, independence activist Lee Ui-gyeong. 장