

GHF
2025



Laureate Lecture and Dialogue

DR LEE JONG-WOOK MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH



MAY 23, 2025

1.30pm - 3.30pm



Program

- 1.00 pm *Registration/luncheon*
- 1.30 pm *Opening Remarks*
- **Hyejin Jung**, Director, Korea Foundation for International Healthcare
 - **Il-Soo Ha**, President, Korea Foundation for International Health
- Welcome addresses*
- **Kyoo Hong Cho**, Minister for Health and Welfare, Republic of Korea
 - **Precious Malebona Matsoso**, Representative of South Africa, Director of the Health Regulatory Science Platform at the University of the Witwatersrand and co-chair of the WHO Digital Health Technical Advisory Group
 - **Suraya Dalil**, Representative from the World Health Organization, Director of the WHO Special Programme on Primary Health Care
 - **Antoine Flahault**, Director of the Institute of Global Health, University of Geneva
- 2.00 pm *Laureate Lecture*
- Activism and Research in Public Health, by Helen Rees
- 2.30 pm *Panel discussion: The Future of Global Health*
- **Antoine Flahault**, Director of the Institute of Global Health, University of Geneva
 - **Margaret Chan**, Emeritus Director-General, World Health Organization
 - **Jerome Kim**, Director-General, International Vaccine Institute
 - **Suraya Dalil**, Representative from the World Health Organization, Director of the WHO Special Programme on Primary Health Care
 - **Helen Rees**, Laureate of the Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health
- 3.10 pm *Q&A with the Audience*
- 3.25 pm *Closing Remarks*
- Il-Soo Ha**, President, Korea Foundation for International Health
- 3.30 pm *Networking & Reception*

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Dr. Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health

The Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health was established in 2008 in honour of Dr LEE Jong-wook, the sixth WHO Director-General, who dedicated his life to the underprivileged.

The Prize is awarded to individuals, institutions, and/or governmental or nongovernmental organizations whose contributions to the improvement of public health should reflect the will of Dr LEE Jong-wook, the sixth WHO Director General who dedicated his life to the underprivileged, as per the [Statutes](#) and the [Guidelines](#) for the Prize. The Prize aims at rewarding work that has extended far beyond the call of normal duties.

It consists of a plaque from the Founder and a sum of money which will not exceed US\$ 100 000.

The Prize is awarded at a special ceremony during a plenary of the World Health Assembly. It is presented by the President of the World Health Assembly, together with the Director-General of the WHO and a representative of the foundation.

For 17 years, KOFIH has proudly awarded the Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health, celebrating exceptional contributions to global health and public service. As the organizer of the Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health, Laureate Lecture and Dialogue, KOFIH unites health leaders to exchange insights and drive impactful solutions for a healthier world. Through this platform, KOFIH continues Dr Lee's vision of equitable healthcare for all.

In parallel with the World Health Assembly, KOFIH organized, in partnership with the Geneva Health Forum, a laureate dialogue and conference with the participation of Professor Helen Rees, Laureate of the Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health 2025.



Professor Helen Rees, Dr LEE Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health Laureate 2025

Professor Helen Rees is a recognized international authority in public health and a pillar of global health equity. A physician, public health specialist, and renowned researcher, she currently serves as Executive Director of the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI) at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, and Chair of the Board of the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA). She also holds key strategic responsibilities within various international bodies, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI).

For more than three decades, Professor Rees has dedicated her efforts to improving the health of populations, particularly in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, immunization, HIV prevention, and epidemic response. Her commitment is reflected in major scientific contributions that have profoundly influenced public health policy, both nationally and internationally. She has notably led pioneering research on human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines and has actively participated in the development of infectious disease control strategies in the most vulnerable settings.

Professor Rees has played a leading role in the response to major contemporary health crises, including the Ebola, COVID-19, and monkeypox epidemics. At the WHO, she chairs and participates in several expert scientific committees, making decisive contributions to global vaccine policy and health emergency preparedness.

In recognition of her immense contributions to science and public health, she has received numerous prestigious awards, including the Order of the Baobab of the Republic of South Africa and the Gold Medal of the South African Academy of Science. Her work is distinguished by exceptional scientific rigor, an unwavering commitment to the most vulnerable, and a remarkable ability to unite stakeholders around innovative and sustainable solutions.

With the award of the Dr. Lee Jong-wook Prize for Public Health, the World Health Organization honors Professor Rees's exemplary commitment to global health in 2025. Her work vividly illustrates the ideals espoused by Dr. Lee Jong-wook: the relentless pursuit of equity, international solidarity, and scientific progress for the benefit of all.



Opening remarks and Welcome addresses

Hyejin Jung,

Director, Korea Foundation for International Health (KOFIH)

“The Korea Health Foundation for International Health (KOFIH), a public institution committed to promoting global health and strengthening health systems, is holding a ceremony in tribute to Dr. Lee Jong wook, a pioneer in public health.

On this occasion, the Dr. Lee Jongu Memorial Prize for Public Health recognizes outstanding contributions to the field of health. The event is organized with the WHO and is supported by the Geneva Health Forum, a key partner in innovation and dialogue in global health.

Dr. Il-Soo Ha, President of KOFI, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics and specialist in pediatric nephrology, is being recognized for his strategic role in expanding KOFI's international impact and his major projects, particularly in Uzbekistan.”



Il-Soo Ha,

President, Korea Foundation for International Health (KOFIH)

“It is a great honor to welcome you to this Laureates' Conference.

Professor Rees is a respected public health leader and advisor, widely recognized for her outstanding contributions to vaccines, infectious diseases, and reproductive health. As we are constantly reminded, global health faces increasingly complex and evolving challenges that require evidence-based decisions, rapid action and courageous and strong international collaboration and leadership.

In this context, Professor Rees's insights and achievements are more relevant than ever, as are the valuable perspectives of our distinguished speakers. I am confident that today's conference and debate will inspire us, but will also help shape and guide our collective efforts to address the global public health challenges we face.”



Kyoo Hong Cho,

Minister for Health and Welfare, Republic of Korea

“As South Korea's Minister of Health and Welfare, I welcome the presence of leading figures in global public health and reiterate the importance of the Lee Jong-wook Prize, established with the WHO to honor the commitment of its 6th Director-General to eradicating diseases and promoting global health.

I am honored to present the 2025 Prize to Professor Helen Rees, whose remarkable work has improved healthcare in Africa. This recognition is intended to amplify the impact of her work in the global health community. I reaffirm that South Korea will fully embrace its role as a global pivotal state and strengthen its collaboration with the WHO and international actors to improve public health globally.”



Precious Malebona Matsoso,

Representative of South Africa,

Director of the Health Regulatory Science Platform at the University of the Witwatersrand and co-chair of the WHO Digital Health Technical Advisory Group



“It is my immense privilege to pay tribute to Professor Helen Rees, a global figure in public health and a leading authority on regulatory science. Her work has profoundly transformed lives, particularly those of women in South Africa, where she led vaccination programs and fought pandemics as part of the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization of WHO.

Recognized by the South African President and Wits University for decades of contribution to global health, she is constantly sought after by national and international authorities.

Having worked alongside her, I am a testament to her consistency, commitment, and major role within the WHO. Her career embodies visionary leadership in the service of life and health.”

Suraya Dalil,

Representative from the World Health Organization,

Director of the WHO Special Programme on Primary Health Care



“On behalf of WHO, I was pleased to congratulate Professor Helen Rees, recipient of the Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize, which honors the legacy of a former WHO Director-General.

I salute her lifelong commitment to the most vulnerable communities, her advocacy for equity and access to care, and her innovations in primary health care.

Her seminal scientific contributions—from childhood immunization to the fight against HIV, tuberculosis, and COVID-19—have shaped national, regional, and global policy directions. Her example of compassion and excellence inspires the building of a global community of primary health champions, essential to achieving universal health coverage and equity.”

Antoine Flahault,

Director of the Institute of Health Organization, University of Geneva



“Dr. Helen Ree is a renowned global health leader and a tireless advocate for public health, with a career spanning decades of service in the fields of infectious disease, vaccine policy, and reproductive health.

As a founder and director of the Vitz Reproductive Health for HIV Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Dr. Rees has played an instrumental role in advancing scientific research, shaping global health policy, and improving the lives of millions through her work on HIV prevention, vaccine development, and woman health.

Her leadership and commitment to evidence-based public health action perfectly reflect values that Dr. Lee Jong wook championed throughout all his life.”

Activism and Research in Public Health

Professor Helen Rees

Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Public Health Prize Laureate Lecture

Under the watchful eye of her peers, family, and representatives of the Geneva Health Forum, Helen Rees immediately expressed her gratitude and astonishment. Receiving the Dr. Lee Jong Wook Memorial Prize for Public Health was not an ambition, but a recognition that aroused humility and emotion in her. She chose to respond by addressing a common thread that runs through her entire career: the intertwining of activism, research, and evidence-based public health.

She began by recalling the visionary definition given by the WHO in 1946: health is not simply the absence of disease, but rather complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and constitutes a fundamental human right. This broad and humanistic perspective informs her conception of "health activism," a commitment to creating more equitable and supportive environments, sometimes by challenging the power structures that harm the health of populations.

Her Welsh roots gave her two legacies: a deep sense of social justice, passed down by her father, who came from the mining valleys, and an unwavering belief in education, inherited from her mother. As a student at Cambridge in the 1970s, she immersed herself in feminist movements, homelessness advocacy, and the anti-apartheid struggle. This blend of commitments and experiences shaped her political and social consciousness.

Decisive encounters shaped her career path. With her husband Fasil, she moved to Zimbabwe after independence. As a pediatrician, she tackled malnutrition, vaccine-preventable diseases, and the inequalities inherited from colonialism. Simple



innovations—enriching local porridge with peanut oil, distributing rehydration solutions—saved lives. South Africa in the 1980s then confronted her with township violence and political repression. An anti-apartheid NAMDA doctor and dentist, she trained first responders, supported tortured detainees, and documented abuses for Amnesty International.

In Alexandra Township, she observed health deprivation up close: polio, measles, and a lack of vaccinations. She discovered the first local case of HIV and soon became involved in developing health policies for a South African in transition to democracy. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission—on which her husband served—also shed light on the abuses of the health system under apartheid.

Faced with the HIV epidemic, she conducted national surveys revealing the dramatic scale of infection among young women. But these data were met with political denial: refusal of antiretrovirals, blocking of prevention of mother-to-child transmission. As chair of the Medicines Regulatory Authority, she resisted political pressure, authorized lifesaving treatments, and later applied the same rigor during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her institute developed targeted programs: services for sex workers, interventions with

key populations, and youth campaigns. At the same time, she leads clinical research on pre-exposure prophylaxis, microbicides, and HIV and HPV vaccines. Some attempts fail, while others open up new possibilities, such as long-acting injections that promise better treatment adherence. But each innovation faces the crucial issue of access and cost.

Internationally, Helen Rees is involved in WHO advisory groups, such as SAGE, and in regional structures that adapt recommendations to local realities. She collaborates with GAVI, CEPI, IVI, and the NIH, helping to shape the global response to infectious diseases and health emergencies: Ebola, monkeypox, COVID-19.

From these decades of commitment, she has drawn ten principles: identify problems, establish research priorities, choose appropriate technologies, ensure implementation, design policies, ensure strong governance, secure funding, promote access, involve communities, and cultivate trust.

But the current context is worrying. International funding for global health and research is declining. The ambitious replenishment targets of the WHO, the Global Fund, and Gavi are hampered by budget cuts, the threat of debt crises, and the need to rethink economic models. She advocates for rich countries to continue supporting the poorest, while encouraging the latter to strengthen their health systems through their own resources, smart tax policies, and innovative financing.

Research and development, she insists, are investments with high economic and social returns. They contribute to global health security and shared technological progress. But global health can no longer be thought of solely in terms of aid consumption: we must strengthen local systems, integrate care, empower patients to self-manage certain diseases, and redesign products to facilitate their use in all contexts.

Technology, particularly artificial intelligence, opens up opportunities: improving diagnosis, training, and epidemiological surveillance, and creating national databases useful for health planning. But these tools will only bear fruit if they are accompanied by a new, authentic, and community engagement and an active fight against misinformation.

In conclusion, she recalls Nelson Mandela's exhortation: "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again". Helen Rees dedicates this award to her colleagues, partners, donors, friends, and, above all, to her family, who supported her despite the absences and sacrifices required by a life dedicated to global public health.



Panel discussion: The Future of Global Health

Margaret Chan: What is your vision for public health in the future?

Helen Rees emphasized the need to rethink the global health ecosystem in the face of limited resources. Rather than cutting services, she proposed restructuring and defining high-return priorities, such as immunization and maternal and child health. This involves integrating services, adopting simpler and more effective technologies, consolidating efforts, and fostering intelligent collaboration to maximize strengths.

Jerome Kim recalled that since the 1990s, enormous progress has been made in global health: millions of children are surviving, and HIV has become a chronic disease for many. These gains must not be lost, but the expected decline in Official Development Assistance (ODA) requires restructuring. The future will be more regional and national, with countries taking responsibility for the health of their citizens. This requires rethinking processes: a vaccine must be accompanied by a plan for its effective and cost-effective use. We must reduce the redundancies created by the past abundance of ODA, prioritize what should be retained, and improve what already exists. Cooperation, planning, and efficiency will be essential to maintain and amplify the progress made.

Suraya Dalil emphasized that the WHO's definition of health as a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being is still relevant today. She emphasized the need for a holistic approach and strong institutions to champion health.

Despite technological advances and global connectivity, deep inequalities persist, particularly in access to essential services such as vaccination and maternal care. The example of Afghanistan, where a woman dies every two hours from pregnancy-related complications, illustrates this injustice.

Suraya Dalil called for a rethink of the current system, a new direction, and stronger national ownership: countries must fully assume responsibility for the health of their populations, beyond one-off aid.

Governments must listen to their citizens, with their active participation, and work in partnership with international organizations. Women and young people, key players in healthcare and its delivery, must be fully included.



Antoine Flahault: How can we ensure greater equity between countries? How do you envision greater equity in vaccine distribution in the event of a new pandemic, for example?

For Jerome Kim, the lessons of COVID show that it is not too late to correct major flaws, starting with research funding. CEPI reacted quickly, but no initial funding was allocated to producers responsible for 60% of global vaccine production, hampering the capacity to produce two billion doses.

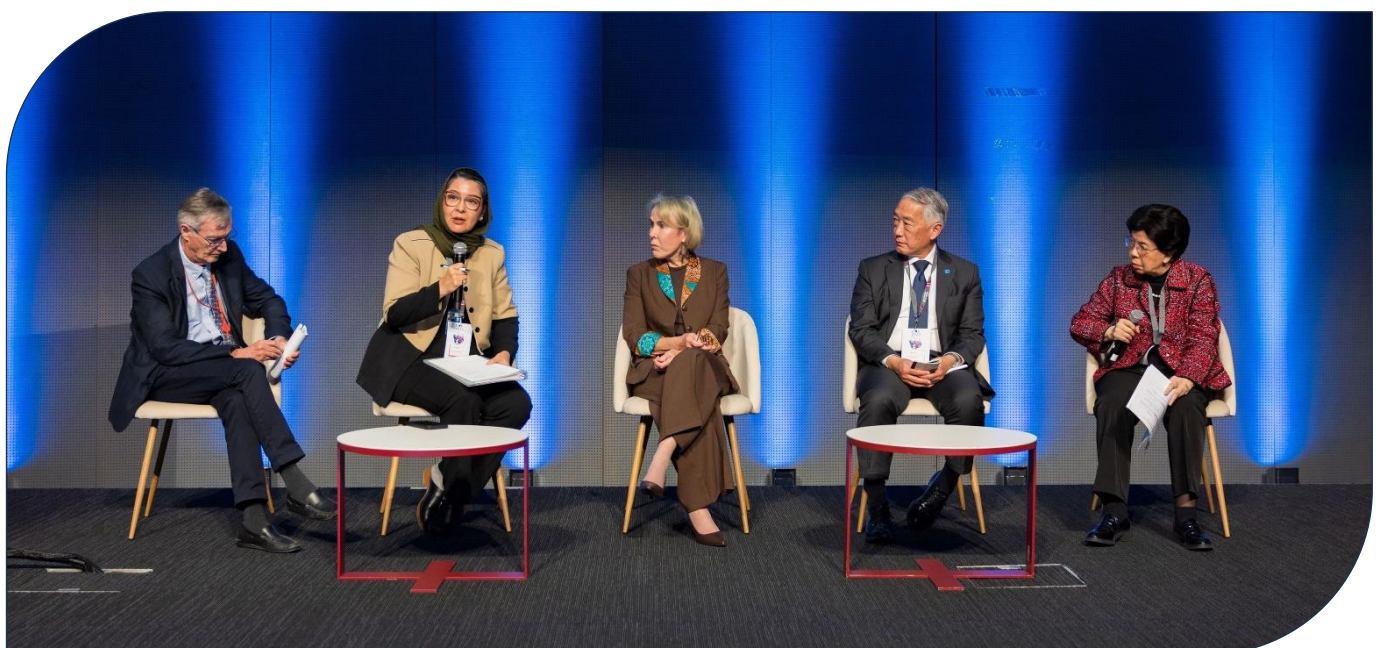
National laws have also restricted exports, delaying access, as with AstraZeneca. The example of rotavirus shows that it often takes 20 years for a vaccine to widely reach the countries that need it. COVAX has enabled rapid global coverage, but it needs to be improved to decide what to buy, when, and how to distribute it effectively.

Other crises, such as the Mpox outbreak in the DRC, reveal that the lack of emergency authorizations is blocking the use of vaccines already approved by the authorities. Unused stocks underscore the urgent need to improve logistics, storage conditions, and administration technologies. These low-cost solutions must be prioritized and implemented immediately.

In the audience, Precious Malebona Matsoso, Director of the Health Regulatory Science Platform at the University of the Witwatersrand, emphasized the need for a global approach with technology transfer and diversified production, as not all countries will produce everything. Access to pathogens and benefit sharing should be inspired by the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework (PIP), initially specific to seasonal influenza, but should be adapted to other agents and epidemics. Lessons from PIP, such as allocations and reserves, will transform the provision of vaccines, treatments, and diagnostics.

Antoine Flahault: Do you think we should also create an international agency to protect the use of AI in healthcare?

Helen Rees highlighted the immense potential of AI for developing drugs and vaccines, but also the lack of a comprehensive framework for integrating it into the healthcare ecosystem. Challenges include regulation, evaluation of AI products, security, ethics, and privacy. While the WHO and other stakeholders, such as the Gates Foundation, are considering this, no coherent solution yet exists, but it should be implemented within one to two years.



In the audience, Ana Maria Henao Restrepo, WHO technical lead for the R&D blueprint for emergency response at the WHO, reiterated that the WHO is exploring artificial intelligence in health, guided by equity and ethics, to ensure universal access. The pandemic treaty clarifies access to vaccines and knowledge, while highlighting the sustainability challenges related to production. International collaboration remains essential in the face of viruses of global scope, and it must be recognized that national priorities may differ, dictated by local realities, while still pursuing the common goal of improving the health of all.

In the audience, Robert Matiru, Director of Program at UNITAID, noted that resources exist, but come from diverse sources. COVID-19 has shown that in times of crisis, it is possible to accelerate the development of lifesaving vaccines quickly, and the current situation demands the same urgency. We must increase efficiency and simplify processes, as with long-acting HIV prevention, which reduces the need for recurring funding. It is crucial to maximize existing resources while investing in innovation, which remains essential for transforming systems despite the decline in traditional funding.



Question from the audience: Does global health have a future without true public health and primary health care?

In the audience, Amitab Sharkar from Tampere University, Finland, questioned whether it is really possible, despite political interests and bureaucracy, to design global health programs and interventions based on the eight elements of primary health care defined at the Alma-Ata Conference in 1978.

In the audience, Christine Gera, associate professor with affiliations at Stanford, mentioned that financing noncommunicable diseases represents a real challenge for the future of global health.

Suraya Dalil emphasized that WHO funding (\$2.1 billion) remains minimal compared to military or tobacco industry spending. He emphasized a return to the fundamentals of primary health care, centered on services close to the population, trust between providers and beneficiaries, and community empowerment. Care must be comprehensive and integrated, including vaccination, screening, and treatment for various pathologies, regardless of the country. Success depends not only on financial resources, but also on political courage, commitment and continuity of health priorities in the face of changes in governance.



The Korea Foundation for International Healthcare (KOFIH) is a public agency affiliated with the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

KOFIH was established to provide healthcare assistance to partner countries, North Korea, overseas Koreans, and migrant workers residing in Korea, and those affected by natural disasters. KOFIH also organizes the Dr. Lee Award, which recognizes major players in global health.



The Geneva Health Forum is a non-profit initiative launched in 2006 by the Geneva University Hospitals and the University of Geneva. It provides a neutral platform for dialogue and collaboration between public stakeholders, academia, civil society, and the private sector.

It collaborates with its partners to create synergies to address public health challenges.



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