

## In Memoriam: Suk Jung Choo (1964–2023)

Ho Jin Kim, M.D.<sup>1</sup>, Hong Rae Kim, M.D.<sup>1</sup>, Sung Jun Park, M.D.<sup>2</sup>, Joon Bum Kim, M.D., Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, Asan Medical Center, University of Ulsan College of Medicine; <sup>2</sup>Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, Severance Cardiovascular Hospital, Yonsei University College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea

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### Corresponding author

Joon Bum Kim

Tel 82-2-3010-3580, Fax 82-2-3010-6966, E-mail [jbkim1975@amc.seoul.kr](mailto:jbkim1975@amc.seoul.kr), ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5801-2395>

On June 16, 2023, the Korean cardiovascular specialty tragically lost one of its most dedicated aortic surgeons, Dr Suk Jung Choo. He was riding his bicycle home after spending two consecutive nights to perform emergency aortic surgery when he was hit by a truck and lost his life. Dr Choo lived near the hospital where he worked to always promptly respond to a call for emergency aortic cases, and he commuted by bicycle. His sudden and untimely demise left his family—his wife and 3 sons—with inconsolable sadness.

Dr Suk Jung Choo was one of the key founding members and the inaugural President of the Korean Aortic Research Group, which was established in 2020 under the Korean Society for Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery (KSTCVS) until his passing. The Group's mission was to address critical issues in nationwide cardiovascular healthcare, including chronic shortages of human and financial resources in individual hospitals, the under-recruit of cardiothoracic surgical trainees, and the consequent gradual decrease and skewed geographical distributions of proficient cardiovascular surgeons over the last three decades. Under Dr Choo's leadership, the Korean Aortic Research Group initiated a task force to align nationwide data with the needs of policymakers. They also launched public campaigns on raising awareness about aortic diseases. By these efforts, several reformatory measures were implemented, such as the establishment of a platform for the Aortic Emergency Referral Network and increased reimbursements for high-risk aortic surgeries from the Korean National Health Insurance Service.

Dr Choo's accomplishments extended beyond his administrative leadership within the Korean Society. He

graduated from Yonsei University College of Medicine (YUCM) in 1988, the oldest modern medical school in Korea, and completed a 5-year cardiothoracic residency training at Severance Hospital, a teaching hospital affiliated with YUCM. During his residency, Dr Choo benefited from the mentorship of Dr Bum Koo Cho, a formal president of the KSTCVS and an American Association for Thoracic Surgery Graham Travelling Fellow in 1976–1977. Dr Cho recognized Dr Choo's background and passion, and arranged for him to study under Dr Carlos M. Duran at the University of Montana. During his research fellowship between 1996–1998, Dr Choo authored numerous research articles—a rare achievement in Korea at that time



Fig. 1. A photograph of Dr. Suk Jung Choo in the operating room.

[1-8]. After his formative years in the United States, he returned to Korea, joining Asan Medical Center in 1998 as a clinical fellow and subsequently becoming an attending surgeon in 2001 (Fig. 1).

Dr Choo's commitment to learning persisted. For instance, he underwent formal clinical fellowship training at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School in Boston in 2006 during his sabbatical year, apprenticing under Dr Lawrence Cohn. Lessons from Dr Cohn at Harvard bolstered his confidence to embark on further innovative works upon his return to Korea. He regretted not being able to attend Dr Cohn's funeral in 2016.

As an accomplished aortic surgeon, Dr Choo served as the director of the Asan Aortic Disease Center from 2015 to 2021 and led the aortic surgery team. Under his leadership, the surgical outcomes of acute type A aortic dissection greatly improved, boasting an annual mortality rate of 2.2% [9]. He also played a pivotal role in establishing a Heart Team for Aortic Disease at Asan Medical Center, which led to groundbreaking research outcomes that demonstrated the role of optimal medical therapy in patients with retrograde type A dissection or intramural hematoma [10,11]. Dr Choo was also a pioneer in innovative surgical techniques, reintroducing the concept of arch isolation in the surgical treatment of severe atherosclerotic aortas and reporting a postoperative stroke rate of 3.3% [12]. His contributions to cardiac surgery extended beyond aortic surgery. He led a study that reported the survival benefit of on-pump coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) over off-pump CABG (OPCAB) in 2014, challenging the prevailing enthusiasm for OPCAB in the Korean cardiovascular community [13].

Despite his accomplishments that had a significant impact on the Korean cardiovascular community, Dr Choo's most remarkable attribute was his personality. Known as "Generous Lord" (pronounced as "choo-nim" in Korean) to his residents, fellows, and colleagues, he was consistently kind, generous, and eager to assist others. Many early-career surgeons at our institution relied on Dr Choo's guidance when faced with challenges during operations. Despite being a senior surgeon, he never avoided taking on emergency cases. His untimely passing was deeply mourned, not only by his colleagues in the Korean cardiovascular community but also by the general citizens of Korea and the country's political leadership, including the President of the Republic of Korea. Extensively broadcasted by all major media outlets, his passing highlighted the shortage of cardiothoracic surgeons, emphasizing the irreplaceable nature of his loss in the country.

## Article information

### ORCID

Ho Jin Kim: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0809-2240>

Hong Rae Kim: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3305-6065>

Sung Jun Park: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0244-062X>

Joon Bum Kim: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5801-2395>

### Author contributions

Conceptualization: JBK. Project administration: JBK. Writing—original draft: HJK. Writing—review & editing: HRK, SJP, JBK. Final approval of the manuscript: JBK.

### Conflict of interest

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