

# Lifelines™



from the National Cancer Institute

## **Dr. Moon Chen: The Insights of a Cancer Scientist Addressing Asian American Cancer Disparities**

*by the National Cancer Institute*

When it comes to cancer disparities, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) supports a number of researchers who have a keen understanding of the science and culture of cancer as it relates to minority communities. Dr. Moon Chen is the lead principal investigator of the Asian American Network for Cancer Awareness Research and Training ([AANCART](#)), NCI's designated National Center for Reducing Asian American Cancer Health Disparities. Dr. Chen is also the Associate Director for Cancer Control and professor in the Department of Internal Medicine at the UC Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center in Sacramento, CA.

Throughout most of his career, Dr. Chen has sought to address Asian American cancer health disparities through research, outreach, and training. He has also helped NCI reach out to the Asian American community to educate this community about cancer. As part of the “*Meet the Researchers*” series, Dr. Chen shares his insights with Lifelines.

### **What aspect of cancer disparities among Asian Americans concerns you the most?**

I discovered that the cancer burden affecting Asian Americans are unique, unusual, and unnecessary. The cancer burden is unique in that Asian Americans were the first U.S. racial population to experience cancer as the leading cause of death; for most other American racial/ethnic groups, the leading cause of death is heart disease, although recently cancer became the leading cause of death for Hispanics as well.

The cancer burden is unusual in that the cancers that disproportionately affect Asian Americans are more likely to be infectious—such as HPV-linked cervical cancer (particularly in Vietnamese American women), HBV-linked liver cancer, and H. pylori-linked stomach cancer—rather than attributable to chronic factors.

Last but not least, the cancer burden affecting Asian Americans is unnecessary because tobacco use, the single most important cause of cancer deaths, is unnecessary. The aspect of cancer disparities among Asian Americans that concerns me the most is the relative neglect of mainstream media and sometimes minority health commemorations to recognize that Asian Americans are disproportionately affected by cancer. There appears to be the continued myth that we are the “model minority” with minimal health

needs. That position is difficult to justify with our being the first U.S. racial population to experience and continue experiencing cancer as our leading cause of death.

**What prompted your interest in cancer health disparities research, especially focusing on Asian Americans?**

I came across an article by Jane Lin-Fu, MD, the pediatrician who documented the health hazards of eating paint chips and whose legacy was reducing lead poisoning in children. But her legacy to me I attribute to what she often said was her “advocacy gene.” Her 1988 article, “Population characteristics and health care needs of Asian Pacific Americans,” changed my life. By combining census data with the available health care data, she characterized what she referred to as Asian Pacific Americans as being an extremely heterogeneous group, with a bimodal distribution of many socioeconomic indicators—that is, it included many people with high socioeconomic status but also many people with very low socioeconomic status. This article awakened me to the opportunity to use my health knowledge, along with my Asian American cultural upbringing, to address what Dr. Lin-Fu called “ethnocultural barriers.”

My passion was stirred up...by combining what I learned about cancer with my own Asian American cultural background, I was able to explain factors that could explain barriers to health improvement. After getting my first grant from the HHS Office of Minority Health, which was focused on Southeast Asians, I was fortunate to receive the first AANCART grant, which allows me to direct my passion for addressing Asian American cancer health disparities through awareness, research, and training and by leading a nationwide effort to do so through collaborations with colleagues at Harvard; Columbia; Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center; University of California, San Francisco; University of California, Los Angeles; and the University of Hawaii.

**What advice do you have for young minority scientists beginning their careers as independent researchers?**

Choose a field of science that you not only are able to master but are personally inspired to do something about to improve the health for people. The choice of a field, whether it is sociology, statistics, or other science, does not matter, as long as it motivates you to use to improve people’s lives. While understanding mechanisms may be pivotal, the more important perspective is how mechanisms, once understood, can lead to health improvement. Then always connect the dots...take what is understood to what needs to be done to improve health.

Hear Dr. Chen discuss the burden of hepatitis B and cancer confronting Asian Americans:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jwMr5m6Vw8>

For more information about AANCART: The National Center for Reducing Asian American Cancer Health Disparities, visit [www.aancart.org](http://www.aancart.org).

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) (or [m.cancer.gov](http://m.cancer.gov) from your mobile device) or call NCI’s Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).*

*More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at [www.cancer.gov/lifelines](http://www.cancer.gov/lifelines), including a [video](#) about skin cancer for people with darker skin.*