

The letter in the safe



Monday morning, 22 May 2006, the opening day of the World Health Assembly. This week 20 years ago.

On the eighth floor of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, the senior management team gathered, as it always did on the opening morning of the Assembly. The Assistant Directors-General and the Regional Directors — the highest-ranking leadership of the World Health Organization — took their seats around the table. Normally the Director-General chaired this meeting, but this was no ordinary morning.

The Director-General was absent.

Instead, the Head of the Director-General's Office opened the meeting. The atmosphere in the room was anxious, although few yet fully understood why. He asked the Medical Officer, responsible for staff health, to make a statement.

She read, carefully and formally, that the Director-General was unable to perform his duties.

After she finished, the Legal Counsel took out an envelope and opened it in front of everyone present. No one knew about the existence of the letter or about its content. A letter stating that, in the event that the Director-General could no longer carry out his responsibilities, he had appointed me to assume leadership of the organization.

The last time I had seen Dr Lee, was the previous Friday afternoon. We had discussed the ongoing tensions with the staff association. He was in his sixties, healthy, under pressure of course, but not more so than anyone leading an institution like WHO is expected to.

On Saturday afternoon, shortly after lunch, a close colleague called me at my home. He could barely speak but I understood that J.W. had collapsed during a lunch hosted by the Chinese mission and had been taken to hospital. I did not fully realise at that point how serious this was. But on Sunday the colleague called again and told me the situation was grave. I went to WHO and met with a few close colleagues. We discussed what was happening, although even then it felt totally surreal.

What gave the situation an additional dimension was something almost nobody in the organization knew about. The letter in the safe.

Nearly three years earlier I had joined WHO as Assistant Director-General for General Management. After about three months, Dr Lee had taken me aside outside his office on the seventh floor and asked me a question I had never expected.

Would I be prepared to step in if something happened to him?

I said yes, although I was unable to take in what that would mean but not the implications it would have for me and the organization. I could not imagine that this arrangement might one day actually be activated.

Formally, I was appointed Deputy Director-General, but under one specific condition: the role would come into effect only if the Director-General became unable to serve.

The structure of WHO made this unusually sensitive. Beneath the Director-General was the Assistant Directors-General and the Regional Directors, all essentially at the same rank within the UN system. In practice, if something happened to the Director-General, the assumption would normally have been that the most senior among them — meaning the person with the longest service — would assume leadership.

At that time, that was the Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean region, EMRO.

The solution involving the sealed letter had originated years earlier under Gro Harlem Brundtland. Concerned about her own health during her tenure, she had revived the dormant position of Deputy Director-General and secretly designated one trusted Assistant Director-General who would take over if necessary. The arrangement was known only to three people: herself, the chosen ADG, and the legal counsel.

The same was true in my case. Only Dr Lee, the legal counsel, and I knew the letter existed.

When I arrived at the Palais that Monday morning, exhausted after a sleepless night, I understood at least part of what might happen. I was devastated, deeply concerned and anxious over what was to come.

At eight o'clock the letter was opened.

At 8:45, J.W. Lee was declared dead.

He had suffered a massive brain haemorrhage and had been placed on a respirator. The doctors had waited for his son to arrive from the United States before making the formal declaration.

At ten o'clock the World Health Assembly opened.

The President of that year's Assembly, the Spanish Minister of Health opened the session by informing the two thousand delegates present that the Director-General had died.

Afterward, one of Lee's closest advisers and I went to WHO headquarters. In the Executive Board room, we met with staff. Both of us were crying.

For me, the moment was overwhelming. I was suddenly facing the responsibility of leading the organization and at the same time I had lost a dear friend and colleague.

Later that morning I delivered the speech Dr Lee himself had been scheduled to give to the Assembly. Every opening day of the WHA, the Director-General addresses the delegates. That year, I stood in his place and read his words.

At four o'clock that same afternoon, the political struggle began.

The Ambassador of Pakistan requested the floor in the plenary hall and declared that his delegation did not accept the arrangement under which I had assumed leadership. He demanded an extraordinary meeting of the Executive Board to review the legality of the succession and decide who should lead the organization.

An emergency Executive Board meeting was scheduled for Tuesday evening at six o'clock.

That same Tuesday morning I had another surreal responsibility: hosting the guest of honour of the Assembly, the Prince of Wales — today, Charles III. He delivered a speech on the importance of nature, holistic health, and alternative approaches to healing, including homeopathy. It was, to put it mildly, not a conventional WHO address.

Then came the Executive Board meeting. The legal counsel opened by explaining the arrangement: J.W. Lee had formally designated me Deputy Director-General; the position, although frozen for years, remained legally valid; and the designation became active upon his death.

Questions followed. Delegates sought clarification, but for hours nobody openly challenged the arrangement itself.

When I spoke, I was very clear.

J.W. Lee had asked me to do this. I had accepted. I was prepared to serve if the Executive Board wished me to do so. And I made one thing explicit: I would not run in the election for Director-General. I had no ambition to become DG.

The discussions continued late into the evening. Finally, the Minister from Bahrain raised her hand. She argued that the most senior official among the Assistant Directors-General and Regional Directors — Dr. Gezairy from EMRO — should lead the organization instead of me.

I was forty-six years old at the time. Dr. Gezairy was around thirty years older. For some delegations, especially within the region, it was provocative that someone so young — and comparatively junior in years served — would suddenly assume leadership for WHO over a figure of his standing.

At this point one delegate requested a break.

People spilled out into the corridors in small groups. Conversations took place in whispers. Alliances were tested. Arguments were weighed.

When the meeting resumed, someone asked whether there were any formal alternative proposals for who should assume leadership of the organization.

No one presented one. The Executive Board confirmed my role as acting Director-General and asked me to arrange for the election of the next DG.

The meeting ended around eleven that night. It had been one of the longest evenings of my life.

The following day, Wednesday, the funeral took place.

Another unexpected dimension emerged. Lee's wife is Japanese and deeply Catholic. On Dr Lee's final Sunday, on his death bed, he had been converted to Catholicism.

So, the funeral was held in Geneva's cathedral. Again, there were nearly two thousand people present. His wife, son, brother, dignitaries, colleagues, diplomats — everyone gathered in an atmosphere of grief that was both intensely personal and profoundly institutional. His son held an impressive and deeply moving speech.

At one point a letter of condolence from the Pope was read aloud, addressed to me in my role as Acting Director-General.

But what I remember most vividly happened at the very end.

After the ceremony the coffin departed first, followed by the immediate family. Then there was suddenly a pause. No one moved. My wife quietly nudged me and whispered, "I think it's us now." And so, we stood up and began walking down the aisle, leading everyone else out of the cathedral. It felt, I remember thinking, like a wedding in reverse.

Seven and a half months later 6 January 2007 I handed over the leadership for WHO to Margaret Chan.

Even today I sometimes think back to that sealed envelope. At present, WHO no longer has a Deputy Director-General. So, I wonder - If something happened today, who would take over? Is there a letter in the safe?

Disclaimer, those are my memories of what happened. Others might have different recollection.