

# Palo Alto acupuncture pioneer, 82, dies

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Miriam Lee, a prominent acupuncturist who pushed for licensing the practice in California and treated patients for two decades in Palo Alto, died last week. She was 82.

Lee suffered a severe stroke in recent weeks and died June 24 in Southern California, where she lived after retiring in 1997, said Susan Johnson, a former student and longtime friend.

Lee's 1974 arrest in Palo Alto for practicing medicine without a license made her an icon for the movement to allow acupuncture to be legalized in the United States, Johnson said.

She also had a lifelong desire to learn, traveling across the world to pick up new skills and passing on her knowledge to many of her students.

"She was an extraordinary practitioner, a one-of-a-kind pioneer in terms of techniques and teaching," said Johnson, who was an intern under Lee in 1982.

Born Dec. 8, 1926, in China, Lee studied in her late teenage years to be a midwife. She moved to Singapore in 1953, where she worked as a bank teller until she immigrated to the United States in 1969, Johnson said.

Lee settled in Palo Alto and worked on an assembly line in a Hewlett-Packard factory, treating co-workers who complained of shoulder or neck pain with acupuncture in her home, Johnson said.

As word of her in-home acupuncture practice spread, Lee attracted a growing number of patients. But authorities caught wind of her popularity, and in 1974 arrested her for practicing medicine without a license.

According to Lee's 1992 book, "Insights of a Senior Acupuncturist," she was acquitted after supporters came to her defense at a court hearing. Lee then pushed for legislation that eventually established acupuncture licensing in California in 1976.

She founded an acupuncture practice on Cambridge Avenue, where she treated a variety of illnesses, from thyroid problems to migraine headaches, said Jean Leong, who observed Lee's treatments as an adolescent while her mother worked as Lee's assistant.

Lee started her day early and treated as many as 10 patients every hour using different tables in different rooms, Leong said.

Throughout her career, Lee studied with acupuncture masters in China, learning new skills that she took back to the United States, including unusual techniques not taught in acupuncture schools, Johnson said.

In 1997 she retired and moved to the Los Angeles area after suffering her first stroke, Johnson said.

"I just think Miriam was the pioneer," Leong said. "If it wasn't for her, I don't know if acupuncture would have been introduced to the U.S. — and certainly not to California — at the time it happened."

A memorial service for Lee will be held 1 p.m. Friday at Rose Hills Park and Mortuary, 3888 Workman Mill Road, Whittier, Calif.