

The Korea Business Interview Series  
November 16, 2011

*Dr. David Dolinger*  
"A Participant in Korean History and in  
Korean-Led Innovation  
of the Global Medical Industry"

*Dr. David Dolinger, Vice-President at [Seegene, Inc.](#) in Seoul, Korea*

The contrasts between the Korea of the 1970s and the Korea of today are vast and few people bring as unique a perspective to these changes as Dr. David Dolinger, who, having spent nearly 30 years outside Korea, returned in early 2011 as vice president at Seegene, one of Korea's most dynamic and forward-looking companies.

With an academic and professional background in the medical field, Dr. Dolinger shares about his work as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Korea in the late 1970s, including his incredible involvement in the Gwangju Incident of 1980. His uncommon understanding of Korean culture and the Korean mindset also contribute to his many insights about working at Seegene and the future of medicine in Korea and the world.

Deepen your understanding of Korea by listening as David shares from his experiences and expertise!

Transcript of the interview by KBC's Tom Tucker  
on *November 16, 2011*.

**Tom:** Hello. Thanks for joining us today at KoreaBusinessCentral.com. My name is Tom Tucker. I'm the host, and I'm excited to bring you today's discussion in our Korea Business Interview Series.

Our guest today is David Dolinger. With a Ph.D. in microbiology and immunology from Temple University Medical School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mr. Dolinger has more than 20 years of experience in new drug discovery and all areas of in-vitro diagnostics from design and development

to manufacturing, regulations and commercialization. After nearly 30 years out of Korea, he returned earlier this year to serve as Vice President at Seegene Incorporated, a Korean medical device company.

Mr. Dolinger, welcome. Thanks for joining us today. It's great to have to you.

**David:** Thank you for having me.

**Tom:** Tell us about what brought you to Korea the first time, back in the late 1970s. What did you do at that time? Where did you live?

**David:** I first arrived in Korea in 1978 as a Peace Corps volunteer, and I actually worked in a rural health center doing tuberculosis control. At that point, I had lived in a small town called Yeongam in Jeolla province.

**Tom:** Talk about some of your memories of Korea at that time. Maybe touch upon some of the relationships that you established at the time. Take a look back over 30 years, and maybe talk a little bit about some of the changes that you've seen from that time up to today. I know that's a lot, but go ahead and answer all those things, if you would.

**David:** Sure. Actually, most of my memories revolve around the people that I worked with and the people that I knew, and the relationships that I developed with them. When you really look back 30 years, in some ways, to me, Korea has not changed. The people are still the same people I knew back then – at the same sort of power, the same sort of drive. Yeah, you can look around and you see all kinds of changes to the buildings, but I think, basically, the Korean people are still the same.

The relationships that I developed were actually quite deep. Unfortunately, because of some events that occurred in the early '80s, I actually had to break off a lot of relationships because of the potential of getting people into trouble. Unfortunately, in the intervening time, some of those people have actually passed away. But just recently, since I came back to Korea, I've been actually able to start to meet people again that I knew 30 years ago, and re-cultivate and re-develop those relationships.

**Tom:** I understand that your primary focus over the past 15 years has been in-vitro diagnostics, as you believe that diagnostics are the key to providing better health care. Can you explain what this field is and some of the potential you see in it, especially as it relates to Korea?

**David:** Sure. The actual field of diagnostics that I've been deeply involved is referred to as molecular diagnostics. That's where we actually try to measure specific targets of DNA or RNA to determine either whether an infectious agent is present or to determine potentially how a patient actually may be developing a disease or be related to a disease.

It's a little tough to comprehend. It's a really interesting area, at least from a scientific standpoint. But really, to me, diagnostics is medicine. It's really through diagnostics that a physician can

accurately determine what is wrong with a patient. The same kinds of diagnostics can also provide information to actually help a physician give a patient the correct treatment.

In some ways, it relates to Korea in a number of ways. A lot of that is directly related to the actual company that I'm working with – really, one of the things that brought me back to Korea. Seegene has taken really almost a new approach to diagnostics, and is changing the whole paradigm of diagnostics. That's one thing that really has fascinated me, both with the company and has brought me back to Korea.

In other ways, I think Korea can really help in diagnostics because it has the ability to provide really low-cost, high-quality goods for worldwide consumption. That is really critical from a diagnostics standpoint because if you can really start to bring these products in at a low cost, it allows everyone to have access to them. You're now making an incredible change to the way health care will be provided.

I think, really, a third point is I think just knowing the Korean people, they have the chance to actually change the way diagnostics is done – in almost some ways, the way medicine is done. Instead of trying to be a reactionary field, we can actually become proactive. If you have the right kinds of diagnostics, you can actually screen people during their normal check-ups. That then goes a long way into cutting costs in medical care, as well as decreasing what we refer to as morbidity and mortality. This is how long someone would be sick or in the hospital and, really, the rates at which people could die from diseases.

**Tom:** You used to run your own diagnostic medical device company in the United States. Now you're an executive for Korean-owned Seegene. What does the company do? You touched upon it a little bit. What are its competitive strengths in global medical market? What is the company's vision of global success?

**David:** Seegene is actually at the forefront of molecular diagnostics, and specifically, it revolves around technologies that they have developed internally. That actually gives them a major differentiation. Most diagnostic companies have been satisfied, really, with the technologies that are out there. Seegene has not. This is really coming from the drive of the founder and the CEO, Dr. Chun.

He has really looked at the field of diagnostics as being the area that's going to make the most impact in health care, and what he has determined by these analyses is that he has to have new technologies. It's the only way that you can really make a difference in diagnostics. Our true vision – he and I talk about this a lot – is really to become the key molecular diagnostics company in the world.

It sounds like a lot, but we believe that we can actually do it. We have faith in the people that we have surrounded ourselves with, and with the vision that we have started to put together. Our whole drive behind the company is really to take almost a leadership role in diagnostics.

**Tom:** What brought you to Seegene? Was it through connections, maybe, that you've made before?

**David:** I almost say it's serendipity brought me to Seegene. Last year, I was invited back to Korea for three weeks. Because I'm a workaholic, I decided to mix that pleasure vacation to Korea with business. So I actually made a list of all the diagnostics companies in Korea, and visited them.

Seegene was the last company that I visited. What was supposed to be a two-hour meeting turned into a 14-hour meeting. I actually spent that much time with Seegene talking directly with the CEO for almost all that time. At the end of it, he said, "If you are willing, I'd love to make a job offer to you."

At that point, I didn't take it because of the position I had in the States, but after getting a lot of work done with that company and really getting them to a point that they were successful, I then made the decision that it was time to go help someone else along their path of fortune. So I actually gave a call to Seegene and said, "I'm ready for taking a position with your company if you're ready to have me." They said, "Please come immediately."

**Tom:** That's fantastic. What a great story. What decision-making authority do you have in Seegene? Is it comparable to what you would have had as Vice President in an American company?

**David:** It's very comparable. In fact, the CEO and I talk really almost daily. A lot of that is really determining the company's future. Really, everyone within the company I think almost looks at me some days to help guide them. They understand that, as a Korean company, they have been insulated from, really, the worldwide market – that they've had a little bit of a Korean vision – and now they do want to become an international company. They're looking to people like myself, as well as other consultants that we may bring in, time to time, to help form that vision.

**Tom:** What is it about Seegene that offers improvements and benefits over what you could be doing in the United States? What is it that Korea offers that the United States does not?

**David:** I think it really is the approach and the philosophy. They're quite compatible with my own. I don't know if it was because I lived in Korea for three years as a young man, prior to getting my Ph.D., and that they actually sculptured me back then. But as I said before, I'm a workaholic. There's a drive and a passion that I have for what I do. What's great at Seegene is there's that same drive and passion, and it comes from the top down. Everyone within those four walls has that same kind of drive.

Is there anything that Korea offers above the U.S.? I think it's really having a greater pool to pull from. What I found in the States, it's really difficult to find good workers that have that same kind of drive. A lot of people really just look at it as a paycheck – they're going to put in their eight hours – whereas a lot of the people that I work with in Korea, and people we've interviewed for positions, really want to make a difference. It's refreshing to find people that want to make a difference.

**Tom:** You're working in a business where government regulators maintain requirements in order for your company to sell products. Do you feel Korean regulations, regulators, and Korean business practices harmonize well with those in the European Union and the United States?

**David:** In some ways, what's interesting is that up until this year, there were actually no Korean regulations around molecular diagnostics. They just were put in place this year. What's nice is the Koreans have looked at both the FDA – the US regulations – as well as the EU regulations, and have done their own harmonization, which actually makes it easier for us as a company to be able to be compliant with all of the regulations that are out there.

**Tom:** Is there anything distinctly Korean about the product design process at Seegene that leads to improved results over what you might see in a U.S. company?

**David:** Nothing that truly jumps out at you, but, again, part of that could be just my approach, and the approach that I've always taken. There's a lot of synergy between the way I have always approached it and the way the Koreans approach it.

If I look back on the experiences I've had here in the States, I think the biggest difference is that you don't have that drive that I've always found with Koreans that I've worked with. It really is a drive to make a difference and to try to strive to always approach things in some ways in a new manner.

The one thing that Dr. Chun and I have deeply in common – we found it out immediately when we were talking to one another – is that we love it when someone tells us it can't be done, because that just makes us work harder because we know it can be. If we've come to that decision, we know it can be done, and so the moment you challenge us, we're going to work twice as hard just to be able to show you that we are correct.

**Tom:** What are three mega-trends that you see in the Korean medical care industry happening, say, over the next 10 to 15 years?

**David:** In some ways, it's the kind of trends that I hope I see. One of the major trends that I hope that I'll see – whether it's in Korea or whether it's anywhere – it's a requirement for us to start to make strides. It's creativity.

We've really lost, in the industry, creativity. We have a tendency to wait for everyone else to come up with the next idea, and then everyone else jumps on that bandwagon. Specifically, in molecular diagnostics, in some ways, we haven't made great strides for last ten years, and so this is a big area that I think Korea can make a major dent in.

The other areas – I wish I really had a nice crystal ball, because it's tough to always get it correct here in diagnostics. Things don't always seem to work as quickly as we would want them to. One other area is really looking at medicine and trying to make it a preventative medicine instead of reactionary medicine.

This, to me, is one of the critical areas that we all have to look at. I look back on the experiences that I've had, and I almost think about it as being an Oriental approach to medicine. One thing that I was taught 30+ years ago is that traditionally in Oriental medicine, you pay the doctor while you were healthy. Once you got sick, you stopped paying the doctor, so there was an incentive to always keep you healthy.

Whereas if you look at the Western approach, the incentive is actually to let you get sick. Because that's the way to make money, because you have to see me when I'm sick. But, to me, that is an area that I think Korea could actually make a major stride in, and really help push health care throughout the world to take a different approach and become more proactive instead of reactive.

**Tom:** Let's talk about being a FELO. FELO is acronym for Foreign Executive in Local Organization. In our context, it means a non-Korean executive working in a Korean company. You're the third FELO we've interviewed on KBC. Having been in Korea, in this position, now for about six months, how is it different working as an executive in a Korean company than in a Western multi-national?

**David:** For me, it's no different. Again, I almost have to look back on the fact that I have experience from 30+ years ago in how I've always approached everything. To me, as an executive or as someone in management, my whole job is to always try to teach the people that work for me.

My job, the way I view it, is to actually get them so well educated on what I do that I can disappear and it won't make a bit of difference to how the company is run – that people will have the experience, they'll also have the drive, to really not have an issue if I was to disappear. As I used to tell people, “When I get hit by the bus, I don't want to know that anything was affected.”

To me, the whole approach, it's really no different. I understand the Korean culture, I understand things about “maeum” and “kibun”, and understand that really, in some ways, Korea and the Korean people are one gigantic organism, and that's the way you have to approach it. But that's the way I've approached it when I had jobs in the States. You don't really need to always confront people to make a difference and to get things done correctly.

The other approach that I've always had as someone in management is to really ask questions, because the moment you start dictating what people need to do is the moment they stop trying to learn. By asking questions, I think both the management as well as the workers can learn from one another. I think it's important for me, even as an executive, to constantly understand that I'm a student – that I'm learning things – and it's the people that are below me that can teach me.

I'm not in there now looking at things intimately from day to day. I need their guidance to help me, because they're going to see things that I won't see. So what you really are looking at is how you can empower the people below you to understand that the communication is a key aspect in everything we do. It's not just uni-directional – coming from the top down. It also has to come from the bottom up.

**Tom:** That leads into our next question. How would you describe the management of your Korean peers? Do you find that it's very similar or different from your own?

**David:** Actually, Dr. Chun and I had a number of talks about this. We both are approaching Seegene as almost, in some ways, a – what would you call it? – maybe even a university, where we're going to use our knowledge to help teach everyone else. We're trying to actually get out of what some people have viewed as the Korean mentality of business, where the upper management dictates and people just do.

We want to empower the people that are around us. We them to, in some ways, though, feel that they're in a safe haven when they're going to make decisions. A lot of this comes down to how we plan and how we help guide people through decision processes.

**Tom:** According to the research, FELOs are most often brought in for their hard skills, but those who don't make adequate use of their soft skills – such as the cross-cultural connections – they frequently fail in the end. Having been hired for your hard skills, how do you react to this statement? What are your thoughts on cross-cultural competencies?

**David:** To me, it's key. Even if you're in the Unites States, you still have to understand the people that you're working with. To me, I don't look at it so much as cross-cultural as people skills. Everyone's going to be different. You have to understand how to deal with everyone. Those soft skills are probably more important, in some ways, than the hard skills – especially now where you can have instant access at your fingertips with the Internet. You can find out almost anything you need.

To me what is key is that ability to interact with people, but not threaten them, and teach them in a way, to have confidence in themselves, and to understand that if they don't know something, it's fine to admit it, but you can also start to develop that information database or that skill, or whatever's required, very quickly. Don't be afraid of it just because you haven't done it before.

That, to me, is one of the keys we can always teach the people that work for us – that you should always approach everything that “You can do it. There's nothing that holds you back other than yourself.”

**Tom:** Many foreigners who come to Korea feel lots of pressure to assimilate and adapt to the Korean workplace culture – they're expected to learn Korean and to function as a Korean would in the workplace. Many also come to Korea with a goal of making changes or “educating” the Korean workplace. How are you approaching these issues of workplace, language and culture? I think you've touched upon this a little bit. Are you the teacher or are you the student, or are you both? What aspect of this effort is most challenging or the most rewarding?

**David:** I'm probably both – I'm the teacher and the student. It depends on what we're dealing with. I have to learn from them. I can't come in and expect miracles to occur. But I know they will if we approach it all correctly.

To me, unfortunately, maybe, or fortunately, depending on how you look at, I have lots of both Korean as well as American friends that claim that I'm part-Korean on the inside, because of the way that I have always approached things. This is 30+ years now that people have told me that. In some ways, I'm very adapted and assimilated to the Korean workplace culture. There are things that I understand and have always understood.

But really, in some ways, what's the most challenging or rewarding? I don't find anything challenging anymore, because I know I can do it. Maybe that sounds a little arrogant, but it's not meant to sound that way. I just have confidence now in myself from the years that I've been working.

The true reward, though, really is in the effort I make each day, trying to be both the teacher as well as a student, and trying to understand more deeply what is going on. We have a lot of different discussions around the workplace, especially concerning Korean, because my Korean abilities are not as good as they were 30 years ago from a speaking standpoint. But my comprehension is at the point that there's very little I don't understand in the discussions that are going on around me.

We actually hold a lot of discussions where the Koreans are speaking Korean, I'm speaking in English, and we all understand one another. In some ways, that's a very interesting work environment. We're also at the point where we're, again, trying to become an international company, so we actually are trying to get everyone within the company to become competent in English.

In some ways, that takes away my ability to speak Korean every day, but as I tell people, I have great conversations with taxi drivers, with people that work in stores. I can hold great conversations. When I'm at work, though, everybody is trying to always speak English to me, so my Korean in the workplace is not where I want it to be, but it is something I'm always addressing daily.

**Tom:** How many years do you give yourself in Korea and in your current job? At this point, in your position at Seegene, what do you think are the three top success factors for you in ensuring that you finish as successfully as you've started?

**David:** My long-term goal is really to retire to Korea, and I would love to be with Seegene the entire time and working with Dr. Chun, who's the CEO and founder. That really is the way I've planned it. We'll see how that all goes.

But from a near-term goal, the way I look at it is really to try to make Seegene as successful as possible, and make them recognized as a leader in the area of molecular diagnostics throughout the world. Really, in the next few years, part of what we want to do is actually get Seegene to have FDA-cleared products so that we can actually enter the U.S. market. We're well on the way to doing that.

The way I look at it is as long as I keep putting the effort in, I can make Seegene as successful as possible. And actually, really, I truly believe the company that is recognized as having the highest quality and the most innovative products on the market.

**Tom:** Let's change gears a little bit and talk about the Gwangju incident. Alluding back to the beginning of our discussion where we talked about the changes between then and now. One area that has been transformed in Korea is politics. You were a witness to history in Gwangju during some of the nation's darkest hours of 1980. Tell us about that, and what did you see?

**David:** How many hours do you have? Besides being a witness, I was actually a participant to the point that I was forced to resign from the Peace Corps. As soon as that occurred, I was also strongly told by the Peace Corps, as well as the U.S. embassy, that I should leave Korea immediately – that they could no longer protect me, and that from what they knew, there was a good chance I might become harmed if I stayed in Korea. I actually stayed for another year, but that's its own little interesting story.

The town that I lived in was about an hour away from Gwangju. I didn't spend every weekend in Gwangju, but I would go up maybe once a month. I made lots of friends with a lot of the college kids that were there, that were at Chonnam University. I also knew a number of people that were considered to be dissidents that I would talk to, have coffee with. These were the people that ended up being the leaders of the Gwangju Uprising.

I still call it the Gwangju Uprising because that's what we called it immediately after it occurred – it was referred to as the Gwangju "Satae" – and so I've never really changed the way I describe it.

We – myself and actually a number of Peace Corps Volunteers – refused to actually leave Gwangju once the Uprising started. We had been ordered out, and we refused because, one, we felt that we had to stay, that it was our obligation because these were our friends that were deeply involved in this and we felt that just by being there, we actually could make a difference.

In the beginning days, we did – before the citizens had taken over the city. They were rioting – I wouldn't even call it rioting, but there were protests going on in the streets, and the martial law troops were charging into crowds. We were actually able to protect Koreans. If we could intervene ourselves between a Gwangju citizen and a martial law soldier, the martial law soldier would back down. So that's actually what we did at the beginning of the Uprising.

Once the citizens had taken control, then we actually participated in demonstrations that occurred every day, and I and others actually helped the foreign reporters that actually came into Gwangju by translating for them because most of them actually showed up with no translators, which is an interesting little side bit on its own.

The other thing that I actually did was spend time in the provincial office building, which became the de facto center the citizens groups that were leading the Uprising. I spent a night there with the

citizens. I was quite actively involved, and it's really difficult for me to actually go into what was some of bad things that were seen.

I think we really should focus on what was good that came about. That was really that the citizens of Gwangju united. When this first started and the martial law troops were beating down the citizens, this was something that was occurring all the time in the '70s and '80s, but they were beating down, normally, the students.

The students were the consciousness of Korea. They were the ones that could go out and protest in the streets. Once you had graduated from college, you really didn't have that opportunity, because the moment you did, you were going to lose your job. Once you lost your job, you were never going to get another one. So it was the college kids that were the conscience of Korea.

Gwangju really was the galvanizing point where citizens as a whole said that this was too much, that you can't be doing this. There's something wrong where Koreans are killing Koreans. So they made a stand. That really was I think the most important thing about the Gwangju Uprising. It's really what led to the major uprising then in the '80s, which really was an uprising, where you started to see the democratization of Korea. It was all the citizens saying, "No, this is too much. It's time for change."

**Tom:** It sounds like a fascinating experience for you. Thanks for sharing that. It must have been just an incredible, remarkable time to be there, right in the middle of that, as deeply involved as you were. It must have been just a remarkable experience.

Let's wrap a little bit, here. Your perspective on Korea is unique from your work in the 1980s to being able to see Korea anew after a 30 years break, with your eyes on Korean history and its future, especially, in the medical care business. This brings a new and valuable perspective for those of us seeking to understand Korea more deeply. What do you identify as the top three challenges facing Korea today?

**David:** I go back to one that I mentioned before: creativity. It is the key challenge, and it's a key challenge for every country, I think, that's out there, for any business you're looking at. But I think Korea has that ability to really break through that barrier and start to reward creativity. That's what is going to help Korea differentiate itself from the other countries that are out there.

The other is they really need to develop a new consciousness. The students used to do that for them, but they no longer do. The one thing that I hadn't mentioned before is that the Korean students... If you look at the Koreans under the age of 30, most of them don't even know their modern history. They don't know the names of the people that sacrificed to help get Korea where it is. They have to start to remember that, and they have to develop some group that's going to be conscience, so that things will start to be done correctly.

The other challenge I think is really developing almost a new approach. In some ways, you might even call it capitalism. There has to be a new way of looking at it. Look at what's going on

throughout the world. We have to develop a new approach to it. There's always room to make money, but maybe this is the time that we need to have a conscience within the capitalistic society, also.

**Tom:** Finally, what's the best thing about being in Korea right now?

**David:** Besides being able to get Korean food all the time? I think actually, to me, the best thing about being in Korea at this time is the people that I'm working with. Again, it really boils down to the Korean people. To me, they're some of the greatest people on the earth. Really, what even sets it apart now is our CEO, and the approach that he is taking and how he truly wants to make a difference.

**Tom:** That sounds terrific. It sounds like you're having a great time. It sounds like you're fully engaged in your work, and passionate about it, and that's all fantastic.

We want to say thanks, again, to Mr. David Dolinger, the Vice President at Seegene Incorporated, for participating in this KBC interview today. David, thanks for the visit today. I truly enjoyed it, and I'm sure everybody else who gets the chance to listen to it will enjoy it thoroughly, as well.

**David:** Thank you very much for having me.

**Tom:** This has been the latest in our ongoing Korea Business interview series. I'm your host, Tom Tucker, inviting you to improve your business results in Korea by joining [KoreaBusinessCentral.com](http://KoreaBusinessCentral.com) today. Thanks for listening, and have a terrific day.