Dr. Robert Michael Williams

November 6, 1946 - July 18, 2024

Dr. Robert Michael Williams aka Dr. R. Michael Williams untimely passed away on July
18, 2024. Instead of winning the Nobel Prize for his lifetime work, he died unexpectedly
due to doctors' arrogance and fatal mistake.
He is one of those unsung heroes, well known in the scientific community, without
whom the modern world would not exist. To summarize a fulfilling, exciting and
productive life of a gifted humanitarian who shared his profound talent and intellectual
achievements unselfishly with family, friends, colleagues and patients requires a proper
biographical text. He was a rare individual with laudable accomplishments who, without
being pretentious, carried himself with precise dignity and professionalism with an
absolutely profound knowledge of immunology and the biology of cancer.
Dr. Williams was the proud and only child of Mr. Robert Arvel Williams and Mrs. Eva
Mae Williams. As a loving child of caring parents, specifically honored his Mom for

making sure he followed God’s commandments, particularly never to tell a lie and to
honor his mother and father, and his Dad for inspiration to be the very best at whatever
path he chose as his life work. Dr. Williams was profoundly affected by his father’s
death when he was thirteen years old. He noticed a year before his Dad’s death, his
Dad changed his heavy work schedule and became a daily full time Dad, playing
baseball, going fishing, becoming an assistant Little League coach, playing golf and
generally devoting time and energy to his son. When he learned of his father’s terminal
illness with lung cancer, this insight forged his future work in immunology, genetics and
cancer. To quote Dr. Williams, “I would have given anything to spend more time with my
father, but it was too late. He had crossed the Rubicon”. As intense a human trauma to
a young body, he had the strength to concentrate and focus on the task at hand, and
made it a goal to figure out why his father died and thought of what he could have done
to have a little more time with his father.
Dr. Williams was an excellent student with the gift of intelligence, a well formulated
philosophy and with the upbringing creating a socially conscious human being capable
of interacting with people in a meaningful fashion. He started working in labs when he

was fourteen, and by the time he got to Yale College, he was publishing graduate
student-level papers. He was a valedictorian, he graduated from Yale College in 1969
with a B.A. degree in Culture and Behavior with Honors with Exceptional Distinction,
magna cum laude and elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He graduated from Yale University in
1970 with an M.S. degree in Microbiology (Molecular Biology & Biophysics) and was
trained by Dr. Byron Waksman who became like a father to Dr. Williams. The lifelong
interest in immunology, on the scientific side, and the great personal relationship of the
two renaissance men flourished and was cherished by both. He graduated from
Harvard Medical School in 1974 with an M.D, degree, magna cum laude and honors
with distinction in a special field, and elected Alpha Omega Alpha. That same year, he
graduated from Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences with a Ph.D. in
immunology. His predoctoral training was at Harvard with Dr. Baruj Benacerraf (Nobel
Prize 1980), who was a tremendous influence in terms of experimental projects as well
as being a personal friend. Dr. Williams and Dr. Benacerraf collaborated on thirteen
papers which became the basis for the Nobel committee to award the Nobel Prize to Dr.
Benacerraf in 1980. His experimental work was essential for the award, and in

fact, it
was Dr. Williams's paper that was presented to the Nobel Committee. Postdoctoral
education formed the basis for the ultimate clinical practice as an oncologist. He was a
Clinical Fellow in Medicine with Dr. Eugene Braunwald at Harvard. His Clinical
Oncology training was at Dana Farber Cancer Institute at Harvard with Dr. Emil T. Frei
III whose use of combination chemotherapy helped make certain cancers curable for
the first time. Another influence was Dr. Edmond Yunis, whose research includes the
genetic mapping of human major histocompatibility complex. They shared many
experiences and truly enjoyed the bright camaraderie from the time they met at Harvard
until Dr. Yunis' death in 2023. Dr. Williams became an Assistant Professor of Medicine
at Harvard before he even finished his training, and later became the youngest Chief of
Medical Oncology in the country. He later became the Co-Founder of Cancer
Treatment Centers of America which was sold to City of Hope in 2022.
His medical education by leading physicians of the era gave Dr. Williams the
understanding and knowledge of caring for patients who are ill, frightened, anxious and
compromised on many levels. Taking from basics like Dr. Francis W. Peabody on The
Care of the Patient and the years of real life bedside rounds with medical luminaries
such as Drs. Eugene Braunwald, Emil Frei III, Francis Moore, George Thorne and Lew

Dexter and numerous Attending Physicians, Junior and Senior Residents, Dr. Williams
understood all of these gifted healers and clinicians had a common trait: They treated
the patient as a human being and the patient was the respected center of the rounds
and the very real aspect of relating to the actual patient while using one's medical and
scientific skills to optimize treatment and outcome was now part of Dr. Williams's
significant skills as a clinician. He treated patients as a human being and he treated all
human beings as an equal in life. His premise going forward in his clinical practice was
that all cancers are curable if you define cure as no detectable active cancer cells on a
PET/CT scan done repeatedly or if you define cure as not dying directly from cancer.
His analysis and approach were very successful with respect to outcome for his
patients.
A recipient of numerous awards, many listed above and the author of over 100 scientific
research papers, with his most recent publication in 2019. His publications were a
remarkable important series of clinically relevant articles from an accomplished
researcher who now devoted professional energies to patient diagnosis, care and
treatment. He believed in immunotherapy and CAR-T therapy before it was
fashionable, getting his Ph.D. on mouse IR (immune response). With one of

his best
friends, Dr. Daniel Singer (affectionately called Danny by Dr. Williams), he conceived of
an immunogenetic theory for overall survival: patients with the highest number of
Natural Killer (NK) cells and IgG levels could survive viruses like HIV, cancer and aging.
Dr. Williams was phenomenally productive, publishing seven papers as a Yale undergraduate, one of which published as a sole author in PNAS. He published
fourteen more papers while a graduate student. He trained future luminaries like Dr.
James Hildreth in his lab at Harvard and they remained friends until now. Dr. Williams
and Dr. Singer had already thought of how one's immune response genes could affect
aging, viral disease, autoimmunity and cancer. Tolerance to self antigens, if broad
enough, could leave "holes" allowing the immune system to overlook viruses like HIV or
cancers. He collected data showing that patients who lived the longest, whether they
had cancer or not, were the ones with the most robust immune system: the highest IgG
level, and the greatest number of natural killer cells. He founded a biotech company,
Immunogenetics, to exploit this observation. He studied T cell involvement in Type 1
diabetes mellitus, experimental autoimmune encephalitis (Dr. Byron Waksman's favorite

experimental model), chronic active hepatitis (Dr. Edmond Yunis), and T cell suppression by HIV. He was always open to novel ideas, and wrote pioneering papers on circadian rhythms in natural killer cells, dietary effects on T cells and NK cells and psychological stress and natural killer cell activity (psychoneuroimmunology). It is fair to say that the work of Dr. Williams was fundamental in enabling the current revolution in immuno-oncology. CAR-T therapy, chimeric antigen receptor T cell treatment, is a direct result of his work in Dr. Benacerraf's lab showing the involvement of MHC genes on T cells that engage tumor antigens.

Dr. Williams was known affectionately by his respectful and appreciative patients as "Doc Mike" and he was trusted completely and the patients knew they could count on him. Dr. Williams is one of the very few oncologists who was still treating patients with metastatic Stage IV disease decades later and has many Stage IV cancer patients in complete remission. A colleague could ask a question, then receive a didactic lecture and then current references for them to read. He was so current in his studies and evolving medical information that when it came time for his renewal of medical oncology board certification, he passed without studying.

Dr. Williams will be sadly missed by all those privileged to have known him. The

sadness is tempered by memories of his humor, joy of living, vital energy in all his
endeavors and his basic decency. He is survived by his beloved wife of twenty-six
years, Ellen Williams (as he affectionately called her Ellen my sweetheart Ellen) and his
beloved daughters, Lizzi, Mandee, Mel and Kim. In lieu of flowers, donations in his
memory can be made to First Baptist Church of Augusta, 310 Pearl Street, Augusta,
Arkansas 72006.

A funeral service honoring his life, as well as his late mother’s life, will be held Friday, July 26, 2024 at 10:00 a.m. at the First Baptist Church in Augusta, Arkansas. Interment will follow in the Augusta Memorial Park. Arrangements are entrusted to Powell Funeral Home of Woodruff County. www.powellfuneralhome.net.

Cemetery Details

Augusta Memorial Park

Augusta, AR 72006

Previous Events

Funeral Service

JUL **26**. 10:00 AM (CT)

First Baptist Church
310 Pearl St
Augusta, AR 72006

Interment

JUL **26** (CT)

Augusta Memorial Park
Augusta, AR 72006