



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, Mande, 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