

Roger R. Williams, MD (1944–1998)

Born and educated in Utah, Roger R. Williams, MD, completed his Internal Medicine residency at Duke University and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Upon returning to Utah in 1976, he founded the Cardiovascular Genetics research clinic at the University of Utah with the goal of “finding, evaluating, and helping persons in coronary-prone pedigrees.” Dr. Williams and his group pioneered methods for family history data collection and analysis that helped define the coronary risk associated with a positive family history and identified key familial traits that often led to early-onset coronary artery disease. The Cardiovascular Genetics group also focused on hypertension and Dr. Williams coined the term “familial dyslipidemic hypertension.”

However, the thing Dr. Williams will be most remembered for was his later focus on families with familial hypercholesterolemia (FH). Starting with CDC support, he began to explore the most cost-effective methods to identify previously undiagnosed FH patients in Utah. Screening close family members of FH probands and subsequently indentifying affected relatives (cascade screening) was clearly shown to be the most cost-effective approach.

These efforts gave rise to MEDPED: Make Early Diagnoses to Prevent Early Deaths (by tracking MEDical PEDigrees), with the goal to find and help as many people with FH as possible. Dr. Williams’ influence and enthusiasm for this project spread nationally and then internationally and inspired the establishment of the model family-based cascade screening program for FH in the Netherlands. The International MEDPED initiative spread to more than 40 countries.

In addition to these extensive activities, Dr. Williams was a dedicated husband and father. At the top of his NIH Biographical Sketch, under “personal,” he always concluded: “Happily married with 7 children (most important accomplishment and responsibility).” Dr. Williams met an untimely and tragic death on Sept. 2, 1998, in the crash of Swissair flight 111. He was traveling from New York to Geneva where he was to chair a MEDPED meeting at the World Health Organization.