



Obituary

Dr. Keechilat Pavithran, MD, DM, FRCP (May 23, 1962–April 28, 2026): A Tribute

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I first met Dr. Keechilat Pavithran in early 2008, when I joined the medical oncology department at Amrita Institute of Medical Science (AIMS), Kochi. My first impression of him was that of a quiet, reserved, and attentive gentleman. Over the years, however, I observed that his actions spoke louder than words, deeply impacting the lives of his students, colleagues, and patients. He was many things to many people, not merely an astute oncologist. His life overflowed every boundary we place on professional achievement or personal influence.

Born on May 23, 1962, Dr. Pavithran's journey in medicine began at Calicut Medical College, Kerala, where he completed his MBBS in 1984 (1979–1984) with accolades, securing the university's second rank in the final MBBS examination and the Ashoka Gold Medal in surgery. He topped the state's postgraduate entrance examination, reflecting his intelligence and diligence at a young age. He completed MD General Medicine at the same institution in 1989 (1986–1989). As his contemporaries recall, he was always well-read. His heart was in hematology, and in 1994 he joined the prestigious fellowship at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital in Sheffield, where he trained under Prof F. E. Preston and Dr. Anne Goodeve, in clinical hematology, molecular biology, DNA extraction, polymerase chain reaction, and Southern blotting in the context of hemophilia genetics. His formal training in medical oncology was at Kidwai Memorial Institute of Oncology, Bangalore, from 1996 to 1997. These formative years transformed a bright internist into an oncologist with a passion for haemato-oncology and complex solid tumors. In 2002, he further trained at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle, with pioneers Fred Appelbaum and colleagues, gaining hands-on experience in allogeneic, autologous, and reduced-intensity bone marrow transplantation. These experiences could easily have paved the way for a permanent career abroad. Instead, he returned

to India, bringing with him a bouquet of experience. He worked hard to translate the Western experiences to suit local constraints, allowing patients in India to benefit from scientific advances. He honed his skills as a clinician, teacher, and leader while serving many years as Lecturer and Assistant Professor in Hematology at the Medical College, Thiruvananthapuram, where he straddled both clinical care and laboratory hematology. Later, he moved to Rajiv Gandhi Cancer Institute, New Delhi, where he rose to Consultant in Medical Oncology, gaining valuable experience.

By the time he joined AIMS, Kochi, in 2004 as Professor in the Department of Medical Oncology, he had accumulated more than a decade of experience and had begun to emerge as a national figure in Indian oncology. At Amrita, as Professor and later Head of Medical Oncology, he helped build the department into a comprehensive, academically vibrant, and patient-centered unit that is now recognized nationally. He was instrumental in starting the DM medical oncology program. For those of us who joined as junior faculty or fellows, his office was both an anchor and an open classroom where cases were discussed in exacting detail. He would listen quietly, let us propose plans, and then, with a few gentle questions, lead us to see what we overlooked.

Academically, his output was prolific and diverse. He authored a large body of work across high-impact international and national journals. In his later years, he showed a striking ability to embrace new frontiers, collaborating with basic scientists and engineers on nanomedicine, artificial intelligence (AI), and precision oncology. His publications on cancer nanomedicine, targeted drug delivery, therapeutic drug monitoring, and AI-driven disease modeling are a testament to his conviction that future progress in oncology



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would emerge from interdisciplinary collaboration rather than siloed clinical practice.

Another enduring aspect of his legacy is his role as a clinical trialist. He served as principal investigator or co-investigator on a large number of national and international clinical trials across multiple tumor types. He was meticulous about trial conduct: uncompromising on adherence to Good Clinical Practice, insistently ethical in recruitment, and deeply respectful of patient autonomy. In an era where clinical research can sometimes feel transactional, he modeled a version of trial conduct that was both scientifically robust and profoundly humane.

Teaching, however, was the role closest to his heart. Over more than three decades, he taught undergraduates, post-graduates in internal medicine and pathology, and DM fellows in medical oncology, leaving an imprint on several generations of clinicians. He would share the most recent publications on a regular basis with his students and colleagues, even beyond his primary department. He did not hesitate to push his students to read more, think deeper, and question assumptions. Many refer to themselves as “students of Pavithran sir,” a phrase that reflects affection and pride.

Beyond his own department, he played a pivotal role in shaping the broader oncology community in Kerala and India. He was the founder secretary of the Haematology-Oncology Society of Kerala, helping to create a platform for dialogue and collaboration in a region where formal structures for such interaction were still emerging. He was an active member of multiple national and international societies, including American Society of Clinical Oncology, European Society for Medical Oncology, American Association for Cancer Research, Multinational Association for Supportive Care in Cancer, International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer, and numerous Indian professional bodies. He served on editorial boards of several journals and acted as a reviewer for many more, contributing his critical, fair, and constructive perspective to the scientific literature. In 2023, the Indian Society of Medical and Pediatric Oncology recognized his decades of service with a Lifetime Achievement Award—one of many honors that included fellowships from the Royal College of Physicians (London), the Indian College of Physicians, and international academies.

His thirst for knowledge and upskilling was unquenchable. He was always reading and was most up to date. He pursued learning even at a stage when many would rest on their laurels. He completed an Executive Management Program in Healthcare at University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business in 2022 and an advanced certification in Molecular Oncology from Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center-Jefferson Health in 2023. Those were his ways of refining his leadership.

To his colleagues, he was a calm, steady presence. He had a rare ability to disagree without diminishing the other person. To his patients, he was simply “Doctor Pavithran”—a figure of trust and reassurance. After his passing, tributes poured in

from all over. Many remembered the way he cared for them in their most difficult moments. He was described as a symbol of compassion and knowledge in cancer care, a description that captures how seamlessly his clinical excellence and human warmth were intertwined.

Outside the clinic and classroom, he loved traveling, photography, and painting, often capturing small, unnoticed details of everyday life with the same careful eye as a clinician. He also had a deep and evolving engagement with technology, ethics, and policy. In recent years, he has contributed to work on health technology assessment for digital health tools in India.

His passing has left a profound void. In Amrita, we still find ourselves unconsciously walking toward his room with a challenging case in mind, only to be stopped short by the realization that his door is no longer open. Tumor boards feel different without his calm voice directing the debate back to patient-centered pragmatism. Our junior colleagues, some of whom knew him only briefly, already speak of him with the respect usually reserved for figures from another era. Those of us who worked closely with him know that he was, in fact, very much a man of this moment—fully alive to contemporary science, technology, and social realities—yet anchored in an old-fashioned ethic of duty, humility, and service.

For us personally, writing this obituary is not an academic exercise but a farewell to our closest colleague and mentor. It is difficult to imagine our department without his steady presence, his gentle humor, and his unwavering commitment to doing what is right. He taught us that excellence in oncology is not simply knowing the latest data or mastering complex regimens; it is about showing up, day after day, with competence, curiosity, and compassion. It is about listening more than speaking, admitting when we do not know, and striving always to learn.

The true measure of a clinician’s life lies not only in publications or positions but in the lives changed, the students formed, and the institutions strengthened. By that measure, Dr. Pavithran lived a life of rare fullness and impact. The department he helped shape, the national and international collaborations he nurtured, and the generations of oncologists he trained will continue to carry forward his work. His patients, many of whom faced their darkest hours in his consultation room, will remember him as the doctor who combined scientific rigor with human kindness and made suffering more bearable.

On behalf of his colleagues, trainees, and the countless patients and families, we can only say: thank you, dear Pavithran sir, for showing us what it means to be a physician in the fullest sense of the word. We will miss you more than words can express, but we will honor your memory every time we sit with a patient, think a little more deeply about a decision, or choose, as you always did, the kinder path.

Conflict of Interest
None declared.