


Krishna Subramony Iyer 

Department of Pediatric & Congenital Heart Surgery, Fortis Escorts Heart Institute, Delhi, India

Obituary

Cite this article: Iyer KS (2025) In Memoriam: Dr. K. M. Cherian (8 March 1942–25 January 2025). *Cardiology in the Young* **35**: 878–879. doi: [10.1017/S1047951125001210](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047951125001210)

Received: 30 January 2025
Accepted: 5 February 2025
First published online: 13 March 2025

Corresponding author: Krishna Subramony Iyer; Email: iyerks@hotmail.com



Dr Kotturathu Mammen Cherian or KMC as he was fondly referred to by his peers and students, passed away on 25th January 2025 in his daughter’s arms as he was being rushed to hospital after collapsing while leaving a wedding reception in Bengaluru. His demise marked an end to glorious journey in cardiac surgery that had shaped the landscape of cardiac surgery in India since the early 1970s. It is unlikely that we will see the likes of him again.

KMC was a short man but a gigantic personality whom everyone looked up to. He was born in the southern state of Kerala into the devoutly Christian Mammen family. He obtained his medical degree from the Kasturba Medical College in Mangalore. After a brief stint as a lecturer in the Christian Medical College in Vellore, he went on to Australia to pursue a career in cardiac surgery. He obtained his FRACS degree in Cardiothoracic Surgery in 1973. He then went on to the United States of America as a Special Fellow to train under the legendary Dr John Kirklin in Birmingham, Alabama followed by a stint under another legend—Dr Albert Starr in Portland, Oregon. Forsaking many tempting offers to stay and work overseas, he returned to India determined to utilize all that he had learnt to establish cardiac surgery in India.

His journey started in the little known Southern Railway Hospital in Perambur, a short distance from erstwhile Madras. The hospital had no facilities and no staff even for basic thoracic surgery let alone cardiac surgery and so he cobbled together pieces of equipment from the railways engineering department and started his open heart surgery program. It was here that he achieved many of the firsts that he is credited with. Like the great surgeons of that era, he pioneered not just adult cardiac surgery but also pediatric and transplant surgery. The lists of his “firsts in India” is long—the first series of infant cardiac surgeries, the first coronary bypass surgery, the first arterial switch for TGA.VSD, the first trans-atrial repair of TOF, the first heart-lung transplant and the first paediatric heart transplant to name a few. He is justifiably known as

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the father of congenital heart surgery in India. Along the course of his journey, he trained numerous cardiac surgeons who have gone on to become leaders in the specialty themselves. His students fondly remember being constantly pushed by him to better themselves, engage in research and innovation, present papers in conferences and to publish!!

KMC was also a builder of Institutions. He set up one of the first standalone heart hospitals—the Madras Medical Mission, which soon became Internationally recognized as a cardiac centre of excellence. His subsequent ventures included the Frontier Lifeline Hospital, Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences and Mediville, which was the first Medical SEZ (Special Economic Zone) and Medical Science Park to be set up in India. He felt that the masses that lived in India's villages needed easier access to cardiac surgery and set up the St Gregorios Cardiovascular Centre through his own charitable foundation in a village called Parumala in his beloved Kerala. His Foundation also runs a secondary school in Puducherry called "The Study - L'ecole Internationale". Despite multiple health issues, he remained indefatigable and as recent as 2021 he established the Dr K.M.Chерian Institute of Medical Sciences in Kerala.

Dr Chерian was very keen on making India self-reliant in cardiovascular implants and devices put in a lot of effort to develop decellularized bovine jugular conduits, pericardial patches, and even biological valves. Unfortunately, despite his best efforts, he could not make any of his products commercially available.

I was not fortunate enough to have worked with Dr Chерian, but he was a hero in my eyes and a constant source of inspiration ever since I was a cardiac surgical trainee in the early 1980s. Once I started my career as a paediatric cardiac surgeon, our interactions became more frequent. In fact, there was a time in the early 1990s when our two units were the only ones providing neonatal cardiac surgery in the whole country. I always looked forward to meeting

him at our national conferences which he religiously attended. Even at an advanced age, he was a familiar sight at the paediatric cardiac CME's and conferences, listening intently to the deliberations and chipping in periodically with his own comments.

His work earned him National and International accolades, too numerous to enumerate. The Government of India honoured him with the Padma Shri in 1991. He was Honorary surgeon to the President of India from 1990 to 1993. He was the first Indian to become a member of the AATS and was inducted into the "Founder Circle" of the AATS in 2016. He was the only Indian to become the President of the World Society of Cardio Thoracic Surgeons in 2010. In 2005, he received the Harvard Medical Excellence Award.

Dr Chерian is survived by his son Dr Sanjay Chерian, himself a cardiac surgeon and daughter Sandhya, who looks after his Foundation. His wife Selien had predeceased him.

It would be difficult to summarize Dr Chерian's life in a page. However, two biographies of him have been published—"Hand of God" and "Instrument of God", the last one being released only a short while ago.

An excerpt from a touching farewell message from his son sums up his life in a nutshell—"Beloved father, rather than mourning your loss we should celebrate your remarkable life, your immense contributions to heart surgery, the countless patients' hearts you touched with your gifted hands, the many surgeons you mentored, the institutions you helped build, and most importantly the lives you transformed along the way. You were truly one of a kind, and the world is surely a better place because of you. There are no words for the 'Legacy' you have left behind. It is not just our family and friends, but also an entire generation who will always look up to you for inspiration and guidance".

Rest in peace dear Sir.