



The 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida and the Creation of the Department of Health in 1996

by E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

During this 125th anniversary year of public health in Florida, the FPHA has published history articles each month in The Florida Public Health Advocate tracing the history of public health from the events that led to the establishment of the State Board of Health in 1889 to the abolishment of the State Board of Health in 1969 and the transfer that same year of our state's public health system into a massive social services agency, the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). Then In 1976 the State Health Officer and his top administrative staff were moved by HRS to Tallahassee after being headquartered in Jacksonville for 87 years. The titles of these monthly history articles appearing this year in The Florida Public Health Advocate were:

January: The 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida
February: The Law Creating the State Board of Health on February 20, 1889
March: Dr. Joseph Yates Porter: Florida's First State Health Officer
April: Dr. Henry Hanson and the Years between Dr. Porter and Dr. Sowder
May: Dr. Wilson Sowder and the Golden Era of Public Health in Florida
June: Dr. Charlton Prather and the First Years after the State Board of Health
July: The Historic Mission of the Florida Public Health Association
August: Dr. Carl Brumback and County Health Departments in Florida
September: Florida's Historic Capitol and the History of Florida's Public Health
October: 125th Anniversary of Public Health in Florida Exhibition in the Historic Capitol Museum
November: Miami's First Public Health Officer: James M. Jackson, Jr., M.D.

These articles have focused primarily on the State Health Officers who led the development of Florida's public health system at the state level and in all 67 counties starting with the first State Health Officer, Dr. Joseph Yate Porter who served 28 years from 1889 to 1917, and continuing on through Dr. Porter's successors. These physicians included: Dr. Henry Hanson who served two tenures as State Health Officer 1929 to 1935 and 1942 to 1945; Dr. Wilson Sowder who served the longest tenure of 29 years as State Health Officer from 1945 to 1974; and Dr. Charlton Prather who served two terms from 1974 to 1979 and 1986 to 1987 and was Florida's first State Health Officer to be headquartered in Tallahassee.

As mentioned in the July history article in The Florida Public Health Advocate, Dr. Prather was succeeded as Director of the HRS Health Program Office and State Health Officer in the summer of 1979 by James T. Howell, M.D., M.P.H. who had been the Assistant Director of the Palm Beach County Health Department under the legendary Dr. Carl Brumback. During Dr. Howell's tenure as State Health Officer, a statewide cancer registry was implemented in 1979 and the County Health Unit Management System was implemented in 1981. That year the Health Program Office also began to conduct surveillance of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). A legislative mandate in mid-1982 formalized the relationship of state and local governments for public health services within the complex HRS district structure with a provision for annual contracts with each county health department. Dr. Howell was appointed Deputy Secretary of HRS in November of 1981 where he served with distinction as an advocate for public health over the next four years. He continued as Acting Director of the Health Program Office and State Health Officer until April of 1982 when Stephen A. King, M.D., on temporary assignment from the U.S. Public Health Service was appointed as State Health Officer. A new expanded Disease Control and Epidemiology Program occurred in 1983, which included a Chronic Disease Unit and Environmental Hazards Unit. Major public health concerns at this time included chemical, radiologic and heavy metal contamination of drinking water supplies, which resulted in the creation in 1985 of the Toxicology Unit in the Health Program Office. In 1985 the Health Program Office collaborated with the U.S. Public Health Service and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to establish a Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. In 1986 the Legislature provided support for the development of a model Comprehensive Health Improvement Project directed toward the prevention of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer for all Floridians.

In 1982, the Legislature enacted The Health Care Access Act, which provided that access to health care is a right of every Floridian and directed HRS to deliver primary medical care services to low income persons in need. The Indigent Health Care Act of 1984 provided legislative funding for this primary care program expanding it to all 67 county health departments. At the conclusion of Dr. King's tenure, Dr. Howell served again as State Health Officer in 1985 to 1986, and Dr. Prather served a second term as State Health Officer from August 1986 through 1987. Dr. Prather was succeeded as State Health Officer in 1988 by Charles S. Mahan, M.D., Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Director of Ambulatory Services for Women at the University of Florida and Director of the North Central Florida Maternal and Infant Care Program. Dr. Mahan was instrumental in the development and implementation of the primary care program in all county health departments by 1988. Dr. Mahan served with great distinction as State Health Officer to 1995 and was succeeded by Wil J. Blechman, M.D., a Miami-Dade rheumatologist and child health advocate as President of Kiwanis International, who served as State Health Officer in HRS from 1995 to 1996.

Despite the State Health Officer not having line authority over the state's public health system and its fragmentation at the state level under three different HRS assistant secretaries, and the allocation of county health departments into eleven HRS service districts, public health under the leadership of the Health Program Office did achieve notable accomplishments meriting national recognition with the implementation of AIDS, Primary Care, Maternal/Child Health, Improved Pregnancy Outcome, Low Birth Weight, Nutrition and Chronic Disease initiatives. An effort to increase the importance of public health within the framework of HRS occurred in 1988 when the Legislature elevated the status of the Health Program Office by naming the State Health Officer as the Deputy Secretary for Health. The Health Program Office was renamed as the State Health Office, and in the eleven HRS service districts the district Health Program Supervisors were retitled as Deputy District Administrators for Health serving under each District Administrator to whom county health departments continued to report. For most public health professionals throughout the state these efforts in HRS were not enough to recreate a strong and unified public health system, as it had developed and progressed for 80 years in the State Board of Health from 1889 to 1969.

In 1992 the Legislature created the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) as the chief health policy and planning entity for the state to help the state with its responsibilities related to the complexities and costs of health care in Florida. Because of a state constitutional limit at the time on the number of state agencies when AHCA was created, AHCA was originally organizationally placed within the Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR)

Along with its responsibilities for health policy and planning, the Legislature also transferred the administration of the state's Medicaid program and health facility licensure and regulation from HRS to AHCA, and also placed the licensure and regulation of health professionals already housed within DBPR into AHCA.

Four years later, significant events and the tireless efforts of some key and powerful leaders within and external to Florida state government would lead the Legislature during the administration of Governor Lawton Chiles to create the new Department of Health through the unanimous enactment of the Senator William G. "Doc" Myers Public Health Act of 1996. Among this landmark legislation's key provisions would be the transfer from HRS of the state's public health system at state and county levels and Children's Medical Services into the Department of Health. This Act renamed the remaining entities in HRS as the Department of Children and Families. Further, the health professional licensing and regulatory boards comprising the state's responsibility for medical quality assurance were transferred from AHCA into the Department of Health. Importantly, the Secretary of the Department of Health was also named the State Health Officer and required by the new law to be a Florida licensed doctor of medicine or osteopathy with advanced training or experience in public health administration.

Thus in 1996 the position of State Health Officer was restored by the Legislature to its historic position of prominence as the head of the department responsible for Florida's statewide public health system, as it had been when the State Board of Health was created by the Legislature in 1889. The New York Academy of Medicine in its 1997 national study of collaboration on behalf of public health advocacy cited the creation of the Department of Health as an excellent example of collaboration among those involved in the public and private sectors of medicine and public health in Florida. The events, persons, organizations, and entities responsible for the restoration of public health within the organizational structure of Florida's state government comprise a study in political science that is worth telling in greater detail in the future. The current Department of Health under the direction and leadership of the State Surgeon General, as the State Health Officer is now called, stands resilient on the legacies of the great State Health Officers, county health officers, and all public health workers at state and county levels, who together effectively guided public health in Florida over the last 125 years for the improved health of all Floridians and visitors to our great state.

(FPHA thanks Russ Jackson for providing historical information for each Advocate issue this year. We hope everyone who has read the articles has a better understanding of the outstanding work that our public health professionals have done over the past 125 years to make Florida a great state.)

The Florida Department of Health Recognizes 125 Years of Public Health

During 2014, the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) has recognized 125 years of Public Health in Florida with educational opportunities and events. If you are in Tallahassee, be sure to visit FDOH as they have historic displays in all their office buildings. Also go the Historic Florida State Museum located in the Old Capitol Building and see the outstanding display FDOH and the museum staff, with help from a few others, created. FPHA thanks FDOH for the many ways they have reminded everyone of the work done by public health professionals for this state over the past 125 years. Please visit www.FLHealth125.gov for more information.