

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

*A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—
often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians*

Rob Doherty, DDS, MPH



Though Rob Doherty went to school expecting to open a private dental practice, his early experience with the US Public Health Service sparked a sense of purpose that prompted his choosing a career in public health dentistry. Doherty has worked in community health centers (CHCs) for the last 22 years, bringing dental care to underserved North Carolinians.

Doherty is currently the dental director for Greene County Health Care, a community health center in Snow Hill, North Carolina. Since it began in 2003, Doherty has helped build the Snow Hill dental program in response to the overwhelming need in the community. In 2007, he helped lead the expansion of the Greene County Health Care dental program to its second site at the Bernstein Community Health Center in Greenville, North Carolina. CHC dental programs strive to offer comprehensive oral health care programs to meet the many needs of adults and children in the area. The Snow Hill and Bernstein clinics offer dental care at reduced rates to 15,000 low-income patients, about 80% of whom are uninsured.

Doherty's colleagues speak highly of his efforts. Dr. Tom Irons, director of the Jim Bernstein Community Health Center outside Greenville, describes Doherty as a valuable resource to his patients saying he has been "deeply impressed by Rob's commitment to his patients, his extraordinary innovativeness, and his ability to relate to

low-income families across cultures." Doherty emphasizes the importance of providing culturally competent and accessible care. The clinics are open 6 and sometimes even 7 days a week to accommodate as many patients as possible and to offer accessible times for patients such as occasional Sunday afternoon clinic hours for farm workers.

The centers' staffs work closely with both the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill School of Dentistry and East Carolina University School of Dental Medicine, as well as private practice colleagues. In addition to opportunities for continuing education, Doherty notes, "Young dentists join us and are exposed to complex oral surgery, endodontics, removable and fixed prosthetics, implants, orthodontics, and pediatric dentistry."

Though relatively few of North Carolina's dentists work in community health center settings, Doherty speaks highly of his experience, saying he "cannot imagine a more challenging, vital, satisfying, and enjoyable career choice than working with a community health center. To many of us, this is the most appealing part of the work — if these patients did not get this work done, in this setting, at these reduced fees, they would not get the work done. They have no other place to go." NCMJ

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