

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

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

Delton Atkinson, MPH, MPH, PMP



Delton Atkinson, MPH, MPH, PMP, has long promoted the benefits of data-driven decision making and patient care through his work at both the state and national levels. Atkinson graduated from the Gillings School of Global Public Health of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with 2 Master of Public Health (MPH) degrees—in Biostatistics and in Health Policy and Administration—after which he served for 11 years as the director of the North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics (SCHS). In this role, Atkinson was instrumental in developing the center's capacity to collect and share data through 3 statewide surveillance registries—for immunizations, birth defects, and cancer—and through 3 statewide surveys: the North Carolina School Health Profile Survey, the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). These data continue to help tell the story of the health status of North Carolinians.

While serving as the director of the SCHS, Atkinson and several colleagues published a report highlighting the significant health disparities between African Americans and the rest of the state's population. The report galvanized public health professionals, researchers, and health care providers to prioritize minority health. Around the time the report was published, the General Assembly also established the North Carolina Minority Health Advisory Council to advise the Governor and the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Atkinson remains a strong advocate of minority health and actively supports minority students as they pursue careers in the health professions.

In 1997 Delton joined the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) of the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC). Serving first as the director of the Division of Information Technology, Atkinson focused on managing the NCHS information technology infrastructure while introducing new and emerging technology to meet research needs. Now, as the director of the Division of Vital Statistics, Atkinson's emphasis is on improving the timeliness and quality of the vital statistics data supplied by the states. He has been the leader in the division's efforts to build new partnerships within and beyond CDC, to attract funding for mortality surveillance, and to spearhead improvements in the states' vital statistics systems. With the increasing quantity of data becoming available, Atkinson is a strong proponent of releasing deidentified data sets to the public. "I will never have enough staff to conduct all of the possible analyses to tell all of the stories," he noted. "We need students, researchers, and others to do this, so [the NCHS] will need to make these data available." Atkinson's goal is to release national data sets 9-10 months after the close of each data year.

Today Atkinson splits his time between Research Triangle Park, North Carolina and Maryland. He has dedicated the past 30 years to developing, implementing, and managing data to facilitate data-driven decision making in a constantly changing environment. Assistant Director of the Division of Vital Statistics Kelly Brown lauds, "Mr. Atkinson is relentless in his quest to continually set the bar for the division's achievement and excellence, but equally careful to set the representative example of achievement and excellence himself." **NCMJ**

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