

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

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

John Shelburne, MD, PhD



John Shelburne, MD, PhD, has dedicated the past 40 years of his life to working for the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in North Carolina. A native of Washington, DC, he received his MD and PhD degrees from Duke University. His career at VA began in the 1960s as a Duke medical student, where he quickly recognized the need for change in traditional health care. He noted the sheer number of patients coming in late in their disease progression, and he realized early on that “preventative medicine is just better medicine.” He eventually served as the chief of staff at the Durham VA Medical Center, from 1999 to summer of 2015, before transitioning to consulting for the center in the fall of 2015. Over the course of his career with VA, Shelburne strongly emphasized a shift to prevention and significantly expanded treatment opportunities for the veteran community.

In his role as chief of staff, Shelburne was responsible for ensuring the quality of care and the clinical privileges of providers at the Durham VA Medical Center. As chair of the professional standards board, the chief of staff reviews the clinical privileges of physicians in order to offer different types of medical services. Under his leadership, the reach of the Durham VA Medical Center expanded across Eastern North Carolina to convenient community-based outpatient clinics in Morehead City, Raleigh, and Greenville. Shelburne’s humble leadership was instrumental in increasing access to care in patients’ communities, from expanding VA treatment centers to the use of telemedicine. In his most recent work, Shelburne has been instrumental in VA’s adoption of a new initiative that allows

patients with limited mobility to receive treatments in their homes; he also currently works with the Choice program to ensure that veterans can avoid long drives and instead receive care in their local community.

Shelburne has served as a leader in public health, hospital administration, and medicine over the last 4 decades. In addition to having been a practicing physician for 43 years, he is a current fellow of the College of American Pathologists and a member of numerous professional societies. He is also an emeritus professor of pathology at Duke University Medical Center, where he continues to train residents in pathology. During his time with VA, Shelburne worked closely with North Carolina universities and institutions—including Research Triangle Institute, East Carolina University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—to expand the work of VA in medical training and research. These partnerships have been crucial for promoting Shelburne’s mission to work at the intersection of medicine, research, and teaching. He noted, “we have to not only think about today’s work but [also] how we can be better prepared for patients a decade or two in the future.” His dedication and innovation within VA have been transformative for improving the quality of and access to health care offered to North Carolina’s veteran population. **NCMJ**

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