

INTRODUCTION

Policy Forum: *Cancer in North Carolina*

The fact that cancer is the number one cause of death in North Carolina may come as no surprise. Indeed, cancer is a villain that many of us have been fighting for some time. The topic is not new to the *North Carolina Medical Journal*; in 2001 we devoted a special issue to the topic. In that issue, we covered many of the same topics that we discuss in this current issue: the North Carolina Cancer Control Plan, cancer clinical trials, and state programs that aid uninsured cancer patients. We chose to revisit the topic because we have, as a state, decided that we will move to the forefront in the fight against cancer. When the North Carolina General Assembly created the University Cancer Research Fund we stepped into a new era where we have committed to better understand the cases of cancer and how to prevent, find, and treat the disease.

Many things remain the same. Now as then, tobacco is the leading cause of preventable cancer deaths. However, there has been some progress in decreasing tobacco use. The 2001 *NCMJ* issue reported on results from the 1999 Youth Tobacco Survey. Now, nearly 10 years later, the 2007 Youth Tobacco Survey indicates that teen smoking has dropped significantly. In 1999, 18.4% of middle school students reported current tobacco use; today that number is 4.5%. For high school students, the percentage in 1999 was 38.3%; today it is 19%. Successes with youth tobacco efforts should be applauded and lessons learned should be applied to other demographics in the state, for there is still much work to be done if we are to improve smoking rates among the rest of the population.

North Carolina has an abundance of resources for cancer patients, survivors, and their families. The state is home to many world-class cancer treatment facilities as well as excellent cancer research, much of which is highlighted in this issue of the *NCMJ*. We are also fortunate to have a dedicated health care workforce that labors day in and day out to provide the best cancer care possible. Despite all this, however, gaps in our system of care still exist for those affected by cancer. Health disparities in cancer occurrence and treatment cannot be ignored. There is still a need for greater outreach and treatment for low-income or uninsured cancer patients, as well as for minority populations that can be especially hard hit by certain forms of cancer. Concentrating efforts on prevention, appropriate screenings, and early detection for all people in the state will help in bringing about real progress in reducing both cancer incidence and prevalence.

This issue of the *Journal* highlights both the historical aspects of cancer care in the state and the current successes and challenges in providing cancer care. We've also added in the voices of people who have been touched by cancer—the survivors—to give us all a sense of how the disease can be beaten. We hope that this forum will provide a roadmap for how we can tackle this devastating disease. We hope that 7 years from now, in 2013, the *North Carolina Medical Journal* will produce another issue on cancer, only this time it will report on the incredible strides we have made as a state and we will have dethroned cancer as the number one cause of death among North Carolinians.

Thomas C. Ricketts III, PhD, MPH
Editor-in-Chief

Christine Nielsen, MPH
Managing Editor