

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

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

Dr. Sarah Morrow— A Pioneer for Health and Human Services



As Dr. Sarah Taylor Morrow reaches her 100th year, her impact on health care in North Carolina and across the United States continues to be celebrated by those who worked with her and those who were inspired by her example.

As a young person, Dr. Morrow was determined to become a physician, inspired by her mother, who was a pioneering dentist in rural areas around Charlotte. Despite the dearth of opportunities in North Carolina (no public four-year medical program was available in the state at that time), Dr. Morrow persevered, obtaining her medical degree in 1944 from the University of Maryland at age 23. Dr. Morrow interned at Charlotte Memorial and then was admitted as one of the first three women ever accepted for a pediatric residency at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

As a newly minted MD, she returned to North Carolina, where she continued to be a pioneer devoted to the health of women and children. She rose to be the first female health director in Guilford County, and then in 1976 was appointed by Governor James B. Hunt to be the first female secretary of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). She served Governor Hunt for his first eight-year term, from 1977 to 1985. As secretary, Dr. Morrow worked tirelessly to expand Medicaid, providing services to tens of thousands of families and children who had been previously underserved. Her considerable foresight is evidenced by her proposal in 1980 to close Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh and

to reorganize mental health services statewide (Dix Hospital was not finally closed until 2012). She was awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, North Carolina's highest civilian honor, by Governor Hunt in 1985.

Following her service to North Carolina, at an age when many retire, Dr. Morrow plunged into a new 20-year career on the national stage with Electronic Data Systems. She served as director of quality care for the company's Medicaid management programs across the United States, asserting a special interest in shaping policies for maternal and child health.

As a person who focused on health and human needs rather than politics, she had tremendous credibility with politicians. Her appointment as secretary came unexpectedly, after she wrote newly elected Governor Hunt advising him of the many changes she felt he should make in NCDHHS programs from her perspective in the trenches as a county health director. Her good humor and enjoyment of life were also evident through the years in numerous sideline medical roles, among them serving as medical director at the Rockingham Dragway. Part of her wonderful legacy, which endures in employee memories today, was her annual tradition of visiting the Albemarle Building desk of each one of them and presenting a fat Christmas orange.

Electronically published September 20, 2021.

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N C Med J. 2021;82(5):309-310. ©2021 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment.

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0029-2559/2021/82516

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Dr. Morrow's service to North Carolina and her commitment to maternal and child health have been recognized at the UNC Gillings School of Public Health with a scholarship endowed by her six children, four of whom were inspired to pursue careers related to health care. Her son, Dr. John Morrow, retired director of the Pitt County Department of Health, affirms her inspiration: "As a pediatrician her determination and love for

children have built a healthy legacy not just for our own family, but for so many families across our state." **NCMJ**

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Acknowledgments

Disclosure of interests. No interests were disclosed.