

## History of Public Health in Florida

### **Dr. E. Charlton Prather and the First Years after the State Board of Health**

By E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

The revision of the state constitution in 1968 resulted in the consolidation of more than 200 state agencies and boards into 23 departments. This revision also eliminated the constitutional provision and thus the protection for the existence of the State Board of Health. The next year, 1969, the Florida Legislature created the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS), composed of some 25 health and social services agencies. The State Board of Health was abolished as a result of this legislative act and its functions and organization, including county health departments, transferred into HRS as the Division of Health.

With the advent of HRS, the State Health Officer was no longer appointed by the Governor but by the Secretary of HRS. The State Health Officer became the Director of the Division of Health. Dr. Wilson Sowder continued as State Health Officer and the Director of the Division of Health for the last 5 years of his 29 year career as State Health Officer. Dr. Sowder wrote that public health in Florida during its first years of HRS had some gains but none were attributable to the new organization. The Legislature passed some good laws on family planning, kidney disease, school health services, cancer detection in women, purchase of a new mumps vaccine, and venereal disease control. Routine vaccines for mumps were eventually discontinued during this time on the recommendation of the U. S. Public Health Service. Health cards for food handlers were also discontinued and substituted by a system of training courses for management level personnel. The infant mortality rate dropped to a new low of 17.3 per 1,000 live births, and one of the state tuberculosis hospitals was closed in Tampa.

The State Board of Health had lost some major programs before its abolishment. These included the transfer by the Legislature of the Mental Health Authority to the Board of Mental Health in 1965. Mental Health would later be absorbed into HRS as one of its major divisions. Medicare and Medicaid after 1965 also lessened the need for some of the State Board of Health's programs for the indigent. Other losses included responsibility for narcotics control which in 1966 was transferred to the Florida Bureau of Law Enforcement. Air and water pollution control was given by the Legislature to a new commission, which ultimately would become the current Department of Environmental Regulation. However, other new and exciting programs had been added. These included the expansion of Maternal Health and Family Planning Programs, the Child Health Program's Early Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) services to eligible children, the fluoridation of community water supplies and the topical fluoride applications for the maintenance of dental health in children. The Bureau of Laboratories and its branch laboratories also expanded their services, and the Bureau of Health Facilities also expanded to provide licensure and certification of hospitals, nursing homes, home health agencies and independent laboratories.

So at the time of its abolishment in 1969, and despite the losses of some important programs, many other programs had been added to the State Board of Health, and its state and county system of public health services continued to be recognized as one of the finest in the United States. However, the State Board of Health was caught up in an experiment being undertaken in Florida and other states to streamline their state constitutions and consolidate government in fewer state agencies. In Florida this included the concept that all the state's health, rehabilitative, and social services, including public health, should be housed in the same agency. HRS was originally organized into several divisions including family services, youth services, aging and adult services, developmental disabilities, vocational rehabilitation, corrections, public health, mental health, and children's medical services.

So after 5 years of experiencing this experiment as the Director of the Division of Health in HRS, Dr. Sowder was ready to retire when he reached the age of retirement eligibility. On June 30, 1974, Dr. Sowder voluntarily retired ending his great career as Florida's longest serving State Health Officer, which had started in 1945. Reflecting on his retirement, Dr. Sowder said that "my attitude toward the downgrading and de-emphasis of public health made this action not only appropriate but probably unavoidable."

HRS Secretary O. J. Keller personally knew the Director of the Palm Beach County Health Department, Carl L. Brumback, M.D., M.P.H. who was nationally recognized as one of the premier county health officers in the nation for his innovative public health programs in Palm Beach County, including health services for migrant workers and primary health care services for indigents. Secretary Keller felt Dr. Brumback would be an ideal successor to Dr. Sowder. Dr. Brumback, however, felt strongly that he could continue to do more for public health where he was in Palm Beach County than being submerged in the bureaucracy of HRS at the state level. So when he met with Secretary Keller, he declined Mr. Keller's offer to become Florida's next State Health Officer. Instead, Dr. Brumback recommended E. Charlton Prather, M.D., M.P.H., the Director of the Bureau of Preventable Diseases and State Epidemiologist under Dr. Sowder at the Division of Health and at the former State Board of Health.

Secretary Keller had appointed a search committee for the State Health Officer, chaired by George S. Palmer, M.D., a prominent Tallahassee physician who served for many years as the executive director of the Florida Board of Medicine and was a past president of the Florida Medical Association. Although Dr. Prather did not apply for the position, over 300 letters were written by public health leaders and other prominent citizens around the state urging Secretary Keller to appoint Dr. Prather as State Health Officer and Director of the Division of Health.

Secretary Keller invited Dr. Prather to meet with him, and then arranged for Dr. Prather to meet with Governor Reuben Askew. Dr. Prather soon received a call from Secretary Keller while he was representing Dr. Sowder at a meeting in south Florida. Secretary Keller offered this top public health position to Dr. Prather and he accordingly accepted. On July 2, 1974 Dr. Prather took his position as State Health Officer and Director of the Division of Health at the desk and office that had belonged for so many years to Dr. Sowder in the Porter Building, named after Florida's first State Health Officer, at the original State Board of Health complex in Jacksonville. A new era in public health in Florida had begun.

Dr. Prather immediately was confronted with challenges that none of his successors as State Health Officer had endured. The Legislature was of a mind that HRS was not working well enough, that its divisions were disparate and needed to be integrated, and that state services were too far away from the people receiving them and needed to be decentralized. So the year after he took office, the Legislature enacted the HRS Reorganization Act of 1975. This Reorganization Act abolished the HRS divisions and reorganized their functions below the secretary under three assistant secretaries: Assistant Secretary for Program Planning and Development; Assistant Secretary for Operations; and Assistant Secretary for Administrative Services. The State Health Officer became the Director of the Health Program Office under the Assistant Secretary for Program Planning and Development. His total staff by law was limited to not more than 150 persons. Many public health functions and programs formerly in the State Board of Health and its successor the Division of Health, such as laboratory services, vital statistics, and health facility licensure were restructured in Central Operational Services under the Assistant Secretary for Operations. County health departments, which had already been decentralized by the very existence at the local level under the State Board of Health and Division of Health, were organized in each of the eleven service districts created by the Reorganization Act. So the State Health Officer and his staff in the Health Program Office were planners responsible for health program planning, policy development, quality assurance, and standard setting with no line authority or direction over the public health programs and services at the state level and no line authority over the 67 county health departments.

The Reorganization Act also transferred the headquarters of the State Health Officer and his staff from Jacksonville where it had been since 1889 to Tallahassee effective July 1, 1976. So from that date forward Dr. Prather and the position of State Health Officer were officially headquartered at HRS in Tallahassee. Many Division of Health staff retired or transferred to other positions rather than move to Tallahassee and serve in the Health Program Office. County health departments found that they now reported and were responsible to District Administrators and their staffs. So instead of reporting to and having a relationship with the State Health Officer, county health departments had a whole new level of district offices to report to that had never existed before. A study was initiated by the HRS Secretary to define the role of county health departments in carrying out the mission of the newly reorganized HRS. One of the goals of HRS was to provide a one stop service center for "clients" of the department to receive all the health, social, and rehabilitative services they might need. Fortunately, HRS could never completely absorb county health departments into this concept and they endured over the next two decades mostly intact. Needless to say, the years immediately following the abolishment of the State Board of Health and then the Division of Health were very complex and tumultuous. The careers of dedicated public health workers were significantly changed, relocated, or ended.

Some programs and services were significantly cut back or eliminated by the 1975 HRS Reorganization Act. The Veterinary Public Health Program “created in 1904 by Dr. Porter to control rabies was cut, publication of the annual report (a continuous historical record since 1889, with the exception of the depression years between 1921 and 1933) and *Florida Health Notes*, both originated by Dr. Porter, were halted by HRS. The Nursing, Health Education, Nutrition, and Research Programs and most notably, the Bureau of Local Health Services were also eliminated. Within two years an extensive Educational Film Library was dismantled and the excellent Medical Reference Library (the first medical library in Florida) was transferred to the University of Florida, Borland Library.” A few programs were added or expanded by the Legislature in the first years after the Reorganization Act. These included the establishment of Diabetes Treatment and Research Centers, the certification of radiation technologists by the Radiation Control Program, PKU screening by the state laboratory and the testing for other genetic and metabolic diseases such as hypothyroidism, galactosemia, and maple syrup urine disease.

Even with these gains, public health found itself with notable losses in educational services, programs, and the structure of the relationship between the state level and county health departments that was so vitally important to the mission that had been established with the State Board of Health in 1889 to protect and improve the public health of Floridians. With this reality, Dr. Prather continued to administer the state’s public health services to the extent of the State Health Officer’s responsibilities and influence within HRS, and at the same time he quietly worked behind the scenes to try and rescue public health from the bureaucracy of HRS by supporting the establishment of a separate Department of Health. Dr. Prather was not alone in his support for an independent Department of Health to be headed by the physician State Health Officer like it had been under the State Board of Health for 80 years from 1889 to 1969. All of the county health officers in Florida and every public health worker at the state and county level as well as the Florida Public Health Association, Florida Environmental Health Association, Florida Association of County Health Officers, and the Florida Medical Association among many others supported the creation by the Legislature of a new Department of Health from the day HRS had been born in 1969. The HRS Reorganization Act of 1975 only served to fuel this support more intensely, while the authors of HRS in the Legislature and the majority of the legislators who voted to create it were strongly opposed to any thought or show of support for separating health out of HRS. The leadership of HRS felt the same way as did the Governor. So those in public health were on the right side at the wrong time. The prevailing politics of the day in Tallahassee were vastly in support of HRS as it was created in 1969 and reorganized in 1975 as an experiment to better coordinate the health, social, and rehabilitative services of the state.

Nevertheless, despite the State Health Officer’s diminished position and role in HRS, Dr. Prather as the successor to Dr. Porter and Dr. Sowder was perceived to be the head of public health in Florida by all the county health departments and state level public health employees. In this important capacity, Dr. Prather put his career on the line by never giving up on his commitment to restore public health to its rightful place as an agency totally and completely organized with public health professionals dedicated to the protection and promotion of the public health for the people of Florida. This commitment cost Dr. Prather his position as State Health Officer when the Secretary of HRS decided he should step down and was offered a lesser position at the district level in HRS District 2 with the title of Health Program Supervisor. Dr. Prather accepted this position which enabled him to still reside and work in Tallahassee, not at the HRS state headquarters but at the HRS District 2 office. Everyone in public health in Florida was devastated by this action, for everyone admired and loved Dr. Prather and believed in what he had supported. This action also sent a strong and chilling message throughout the state to the public health employees of HRS.

Dr. Prather was born on March 13, 1930 in Jasper, Hamilton County, Florida to Walter and Myrtle Prather. While in high school Dr. Prather was introduced to a book on microbiology which inspired him to attend summer classes at the University of Florida’s Microbiology Department between his tenth and twelfth grades. Also while in high school, Dr. Prather’s famous nickname of “Skeeter” took shape as his classmates shortened it from “Mosquito Hawk.” As a young boy Dr. Prather would actually tie a string around a dragonfly, known as mosquito hawks in the country, and fly them like a kite. Pretty soon family and neighbors started calling young Charlton Mosquito Hawk which would evolve into just Skeeter.

Dr. Prather graduated from the University of Florida in 1952 with a bachelor's degree in microbiology. He then enrolled in the master's degree program in microbiology at UF with the goal of getting a Ph.D. in microbiology and began working in the laboratory at the State Board of Health. The director of the State Board of Health's laboratory, Albert V. Hardy, M.D., Ph.D., DrPH., came to be Dr. Prather's mentor. Dr. Hardy convinced Dr. Prather that in order to achieve his career goal of fighting infectious diseases he needed to go to medical school. At that time there were no medical schools in Florida but state funding was available for students going to medical schools out of state. So Dr. Prather went to Bowman Gray School of Medicine at Wake Forest University, graduating in 1959 with his degree as a doctor of medicine. After serving as a hospital epidemiologist during his senior year of medical school, Dr. Prather was doing research at the State Board of Health laboratory under Dr. Hardy, then completed his medical residency at Jackson Memorial Hospital at the University of Miami. Dr. Prather on the advice of Dr. Hardy then received his Master of Public Health degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Prather would ultimately become the State Epidemiologist for Dr. Sowder at the State Board of Health, who also appointed Dr. Prather as the Director of the Bureau of Preventable Diseases, the position Dr. Prather held when Dr. Sowder retired in 1974. Dr. Prather by this time was well known and respected throughout the state of Florida by all the county health departments and had a national reputation as an epidemiologist among public health officials in the other states, and with the U.S. Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and he served as the President of the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists.

After his tenure as State Health Officer from 1974 to 1979, Dr. Prather would serve as State Health Officer at HRS for a second term from August 1986 up through 1987 when he retired as State Health Officer for the final time after over 35 years of public health service in Florida. Dr. Prather's dream for an independent Department of Health came true when the Legislature unanimously enacted the Senator William G. "Doc" Myers Public Health Act of 1996, which was signed into law by Governor Lawton Chiles thus creating the new and current Florida Department of Health. In recognition of Dr. Prather's outstanding career as a public servant dedicated to the public health of Floridians, the Legislature in 1999 named the new Department of Health headquarters building as the "E. Charlton Prather, M.D. Building." This was especially gratifying to all the public health workers in Florida who knew the sacrifice Dr. Prather made for his belief and commitment to a strong state and county public health system for the people of Florida. In March of 2000 the Secretary of the Department of Health, Robert G. Brooks, M.D., M.B.A., M.P.H., hosted a ceremony to honor and dedicate the headquarters building in Dr. Prather's name with Dr. Prather and his wife, Lou, present along with many other dignitaries, guests, and Department of Health employees in attendance.

Dr. Prather and his wife, Lou Leigh Prather, have two sons, Walter Franklin Prather, and E. Charlton Prather, Jr., and a grandson also named Charlton. Dr. Prather continues his lifelong avocation as a world class blacksmith who has done most of the iron work at Mission San Luis in Tallahassee, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Mission and Apalachee Indian Village, where he also serves on the Mission's Board of Directors. A career member and advocate for the Florida Public Health Association, Dr. Prather received the FPHA's Meritorious Service Award in 1975. Dr. Prather has been a mentor to countless public health professionals in Florida who continue to benefit from his sage advice and counsel. Dr. Prather was a most worthy successor to Dr. Sowder and all the State Health Officers before him. Dr. Prather kept alive the foundation of public health that was started so strongly by Dr. Porter and built upon so significantly by Dr. Sowder during their long and successful tenures as State Health Officer. All of the State Health Officers who would succeed Dr. Prather, and all the public health professionals in the state, are continuing to build on the foundation of public health built by the great legends of public health in Florida, and Dr. Prather absolutely deserves a hero's place among them.

---