

PROFESSOR TURNED CEO

gives back to the School

New public health challenges inspire Gillings to invest in the School's Department of Biostatistics

BY RAMONA DUBOSE

Twenty years ago, the practice of public health seemed to be sailing along on a sea of successful interventions that had revolutionized the health of the nation, and to a large extent, the world. Vaccinations, sanitation, modern pharmaceuticals and preventive health care all seemed to be working miracles.

"We thought we were conquering disease," says Dr. Dennis Gillings, CBE (Commander of the British Empire), former UNC biostatistics professor and now chairman and chief executive officer of Quintiles Transnational Corp.

Then along came AIDS, SARS, antibiotic-resistant strains of tuberculosis and malaria...

"Public health is entering a pioneering age again," he says. "We have a huge human challenge before us."

To help Carolina's School of Public Health meet that challenge, Gillings made a gift of \$2.4 million that will be further supplemented with a state match to endow the Dennis Gillings

Professorship in Biostatistics. The Gillings Distinguished Professorship is held by Dr. Danyu Lin, who came to UNC in 2001 from the University of Washington. Last year, Lin received the prestigious Method to Extend Research in Time (MERIT) Award by the National Institutes of Health. Additionally, Gillings has made several other substantial gifts to support other departmental programs.

As a professor in the biostatistics department from 1971 to 1988, Gillings and UNC Professor of Biostatistics Dr. Gary Koch, along with a handful of graduate students, applied the latest methodologies to the analysis of clinical trial data for pharmaceutical companies. The business was incorporated as Quintiles in 1982. A few years later, Gillings left the School to run the company full time. Quintiles Transnational is now the world's leading pharmaceutical services company with annual revenues of \$2 billion. The work he and Koch started at the School continues, though, with Koch as director of the Biometrics

Consulting Laboratory.

Gillings felt inspired to support the School with a professorship endowment for several reasons.

"I was a professor in the School, and that brings a strong affinity to its goals and aspirations," he says. "Also, while I was here, I learned much of what I needed to know to found Quintiles. This is one way of recognizing the School's role in the success of the business."

A third reason for making the donation, he says, was his strong desire to help the School meet the challenges facing public health as efficiently as possible.

"In the '70's, I detected a somewhat emotional attitude toward public health problems," he says. "But everything is not automatically worthwhile. Public health resources are not infinite. The success of public health in the future depends on a business mind being part of the equation."

To meet newer, bolder challenges, and to repeat the amazing public health successes of the past, tough



Dr. Dennis Gillings

choices have to be made, he says.

"The public relates to individual stories, not statistics" he says, "but the fact is, we have a responsibility to represent public health through broad-based application."

"The extent of the impact public health practice will ultimately have depends more and more on its ability to combine academic strengths in discovery and training with business strengths in efficiency and finance," he says. "In other words, do the most good we can with the resources available."

Gillings sees a critical role for biostatisticians in helping define and advance those applications. "Statisticians have to be more than just mathematicians," he says. ▶▶

“They have to provide valuable information to society that will benefit society. Statisticians should be the gatekeepers for good, reliable, valid information. If we are to make advances in society, they must be based on valid data.”

This is the view of statistics held by the late Dr. Bernard Greenberg, former chair of the Biostatistics Department and later dean of the School. “He said you start with a strong theory, but you have to follow it all the way through to the public health application,” Gillings says.

Born in London, Gillings earned his undergraduate degree in mathematical statistics from the University of Cambridge in England in 1967 and his doctorate in mathematics from the University of Exeter in 1972, after which he joined the UNC faculty. By 1981, Gillings had become a full professor in the UNC School of Public Health and was named director of UNC-CH’s Biometric Consulting Laboratory.

Gillings has helped the School and University in numerous volunteer capacities, including serving as a board member of the School of Public Health’s Advisory Council, the Graduate Education Advancement Board of UNC’s Graduate School, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and the UNC Health Care Systems. He received the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science from the University in May 2001.

“We are so grateful to Joan and Dennis Gillings for their

generosity to the School of Public Health,” says Dean Barbara K. Rimer. “We have benefited from their wisdom as well as their tremendous financial gifts. I am especially pleased to have a professorship named for Gillings, because Dennis Gillings’ own career is such an important beacon for us. He has shown that theory and practice are not polar opposites. Rather, they are interwoven, and practice is what, in the end, we must influence if we are to improve the public’s health. In his own work, he has demonstrated that outstanding biostatistical work can be used to better human health through the conduct of impeccably-managed clinical trials conducted around the world.”

Gillings presented the inaugural Dean’s 21st Century Lecture at the School in December 2005, speaking about what he called “The Value Proposition.” (It can be viewed at www.sph.unc.edu/about/webcasts.)

“To improve world health, we must deliver effective healthcare products and services to the greatest number of people for the lowest cost,” he says. “The School of Public Health trains practitioners for the ‘healing and caring professions.’ All well and good, but healthcare is also a very tough business. It’s about costs, customers and products—therapies and services... These are the strengths of the private sector. I think the future advances in world health will result from combining academic strengths and business strengths.” ■