

School alum revolutionizes *study of* occupational epidemiology

DR. AARON BLAIR'S FIRST TASTE OF PUBLIC HEALTH CAME FROM AN UNLIKELY QUARTER. WHILE WORKING AS A LECTURER IN 1973 AT SAINT ANDREWS PRESBYTERIAN COLLEGE IN LAURINBURG, N.C., HE WAS ASKED TO TEACH A COURSE IN HUMAN ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY.

Problem was, Blair's undergraduate and master's degrees were in botany, and his doctorate was in genetics. To learn about human physiology, he chose to attend the UNC School of Public Health.

That decision changed the course of his professional life and gave the study of cancer one of its most accomplished advocates.

Once at UNC, Blair became hooked on epidemiology. He earned his master's degree from the School in 1976 and went on to pursue a career in public health that culminated as chief of the Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology Branch of the National Cancer Institute (NCI) for more than 25 years.

At NCI, Blair oversaw the expansion of the branch from four investigators to more than 30. He was among the first to

revolutionize the study of occupational epidemiology by introducing quantitative and molecular methods of assessing exposure to environmental hazards. His work on case studies among farmers in the Midwest pointed to the role of pesticides and agricultural chemicals in the high incidence of specific types of cancer among the farmer populations. That effort led to the large-scale Agricultural Health Study he pioneered, which measured various health outcomes over a 15-year period among agricultural workers in Iowa and North Carolina.

Over the years, Blair has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the School's 2007 Barr Distinguished Alumni Award for contributions to public health; the National Institutes of Health Director's Award; and the John Goldsmith Award for Outstanding



Dr. Aaron Blair

Contributions to Epidemiology, for his work on occupational and environmental causes of cancer.

"The UNC School of Public Health is a very high-caliber and prestigious school," Blair notes, adding that the expertise of scientists at the School and the resources available to students and faculty "come together in helping to further an individual career."

Blair retired as branch chief at the NCI in 2006. An avid golfer, he now divides his time between academic pursuits, golf and his four grandchildren. ■

— BY PRASHANT NAIR, PHD