

When Ricketts talks, the N.C. General Assembly listens

When Thomas Ricketts came back to North Carolina in search of a job in medical journalism, he didn't know that years later, he would influence government decisions on health policy and administration in the state.

"One of the first stories I ever did for a local newspaper in Chapel Hill was about rural health policy in North Carolina. I didn't know at that time, but that should have told me something," says Ricketts, who earned a bachelor's in history from Carolina as a Morehead Scholar and worked as production and design manager at the *Washington* (D.C.) *Monthly* before returning to the Tar Heel state.

Ricketts is now professor of health policy at Carolina's School of Public Health and director of the North Carolina Rural Health Research Program at UNC. He also is chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee for United Health Foundation's annual review, "America's Health Rankings: A Call to Action for People and Their Communities." UNC's

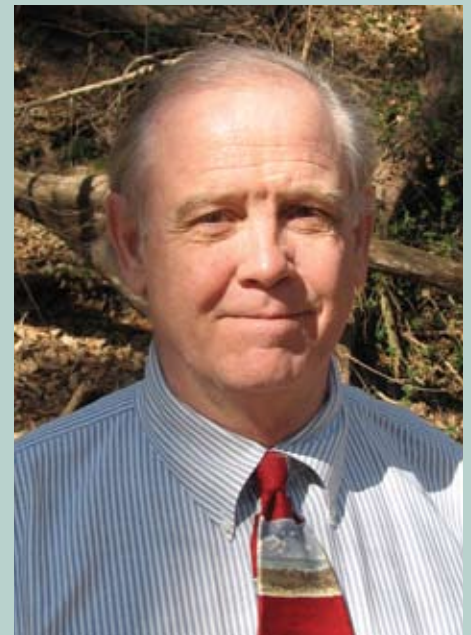
School of Public Health is the academic partner to the review, which also is sponsored by the American Public Health Association and the Partnership for Prevention.

Ricketts says he started his public health

Tom is very creative in terms of thinking about how delivery of health care relates to the work force supply.

career writing proposals for the North Carolina Heart Association.

Goaded by a need to know more about how the system worked, he decided, in 1976, to pursue a master's in health policy at the UNC School of Public Health. Since then, his



Dr. Thomas Ricketts

academic pursuits and passion for health care administration have led him on a journey punctuated by degrees, awards and national recognition. He earned his doctorate in health policy from the School in 1988. He speaks

French and Russian and, as a side note, is an avid bicyclist who has successfully completed amateur stages of the Tour de France.

These days, as director of the North Carolina Rural Health Research Program in the UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Ser-

vices Research, his research focus is the study of North Carolina's health care work force distribution and its effect on access to care and the health status of North Carolinians.

"We have recently anticipated shortages of allied health workers, doctors and dentists, and when we issue a warning that such a thing is about to happen, usually the General Assembly of North Carolina pays attention," says Ricketts, who is also the Sheps Center deputy director.

"Tom is very creative in terms of thinking about how delivery of health care relates to the work force supply," notes Sheps Center Director Dr. Tim Carey, who has known him for more than 20 years.

As head of the Health Policy Analysis Unit at the Sheps Center, Ricketts also works at the federal level advising the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services on health policy issues. He is editor-in-chief of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* and also serves on advisory committees of the Association of American Medical Colleges

and AcademyHealth.

"If there's a complex health care policy issue, I'd want to turn to Tom rather than anyone else. He's an innovative and creative thinker," says Dr. Peggy Leatt, chair of the School's Department of Health Policy and Administration, who has worked with Ricketts since 2002.

Recently, Ricketts has been working with French researchers to develop a new, U.S.-style school of public health with campuses in Paris and Rennes. He is involved in planning and teaching at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sante Publique and hopes the affiliation will result in knowledge transfer between UNC and this emerging academic institution.

"I'm hoping that our students and faculty can spend some time working there," he says. "The EU has set a goal of making Europe the leader in the knowledge-based economies. The United States needs to respond to that, but we also need to know how we can learn from each other." ■

— BY PRASHANT NAIR, PHD



Dr. Thomas Ricketts, (left) professor of health policy at UNC-Chapel Hill, is an avid bicyclist who has successfully completed amateur stages of the Tour de France. As director of the N.C. Rural Health Research Program, Ricketts' research focus is the study of North Carolina's health care work force distribution and its effect on access to care and the health status of North Carolinians.