Dr. Stephen B. Thacker, a dedicated, prolific champion of applied epidemiology and evidence-based public health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), died on February 15, 2013, at the age of 65 years. Throughout his nearly 37 years at the CDC, Steve was a preeminent leader of public health science and an ardent advocate for the professionals who practice that science. He held various leadership positions across the agency, including Director of the Office of Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services (2010–2012), Director of the Office of Workforce and Career Development (2004–2010), and Director of the Epidemiology Program Office (1989–2004). In addition to these permanent CDC appointments, Steve was tapped to serve in an acting capacity at different times as Deputy Director of the CDC, Director of the National Center for Environmental Health, Director of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, and Director of the National Center for Public Health Informatics, all of which were a reflection of his broad-ranging skills and effectiveness.

Steve was born in Independence, Missouri, on December 30, 1947. His father died when he was 13, and his mother returned to nursing to support herself and her only son. A teacher at his high school recognized the enormous potential in this talented young man and encouraged him to apply to Princeton University, where he was accepted and to which he received a full scholarship. Steve went on to receive his undergraduate degree in biochemistry in 1969 and his medical degree from Mount Sinai School of Medicine in 1973. He completed residency training in family medicine at the Duke University School of Medicine in 1976 while also participating in the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars program. Even before he joined the CDC, he demonstrated a strong interest in community health and scientific evaluation of interventions, publishing papers on primary care in the community and health technology assessment based on his work during residency and the Clinical Scholars program. He eventually merged these interests in his CDC career, which emphasized public health science. In 1984, he was awarded a master of science degree in epidemiology from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Steve came to the CDC in 1976 as an Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) officer and was stationed with the Health
Department in Washington, DC. On his second day on the job, he was dispatched to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to investigate a statewide outbreak of an unknown illness among attendees of an American Legion convention at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia. That now-famous investigation was the first time Legionnaires’ disease was identified and today remains a consummate example of the work of the CDC’s disease detectives.

During his tenure at the CDC, Steve was a steadfast champion of epidemiology, public health surveillance, and other analytic methods to improve the practice of public health science. He fostered efforts to identify, introduce, and disseminate innovative scientific methods and technology to enhance public health practice at the CDC, nationally, and internationally. Steve led development of the first CDC plan for surveillance and the first guidelines for evaluating surveillance systems, which have become the global standard for surveillance evaluation. He initiated the use of such analytic methods as time-series and Bayesian analyses, techniques now routinely used for analyzing public health surveillance data. He was visionary in bringing evidence-based science to bear on public health concerns by spearheading efforts to use meta-analyses and systematic reviews at the CDC. His skills as an independent arbiter of complex scientific problems were well known, and he led multiple expert panels that addressed a variety of challenges on behalf of the agency (e.g., the role of mold in pulmonary hemorrhage among infants and a re-analysis of the updated actual causes of death).

Steve was a dedicated steward of many of the CDC’s flagship programs, ensuring their viability, credibility, and scientific rigor. He was known for his wall of pictures—the photos, names, and positions of current EIS officers and other training program participants displayed in front of his desk—that demonstrated his commitment to the fellowships and the trainees who are the future of public health. Every week for more than 20 years, he reviewed the articles to be published in the CDC’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR). In the mid-1990s, he was instrumental in the initiation and ongoing development of the CDC’s Epi Info software, and he enthusiastically embraced and facilitated the development of the Guide to Community Preventive Services as a foundation for evidence-based public health.

In addition to his scientific contributions, Steve supported public health through his mentorship of and influence on young scientists. Combined, the programs developed or expanded under his leadership—the EIS Program, the Public Health Informatics Fellowship Program, the Prevention Effectiveness Fellowship, and others—have introduced thousands of emerging professionals to the breadth and depth of the field of public health and increased the agency’s expertise in such areas as informatics and economics. He was especially dedicated to the EIS program. He was committed to its quality, personally interviewing applicants and reviewing applications each year, and he ensured expansion of the proportion of women and minorities in each succeeding class. He could remember the background of every EIS officer admitted during his watch, and he never missed a day of the annual EIS Conference. On the global front, Steve was instrumental in launching the Field Epidemiology Training Programs in more than 35 countries around the world. The CDC’s current participation in the Science Olympiad, which brings public health and epidemiology directly into middle and high school classrooms, and the CDC’s Science Ambassador program for teachers stem directly from efforts initiated under his leadership. Although his impact through dissemination of his “social DNA” (as defined by former CDC Director Dr. Bill Foege) is immeasurable, the numerous comments posted on the Thacker family website (http://www.teamthacker.com) by EIS graduates and other former fellows attest movingly and substantially to his legacy.

Steve’s scientific and leadership qualities were recognized through more than 40 major awards and commendations. He attained the rank of Assistant Surgeon General/Rear Admiral (upper half) during his career. His contributions were reflected in multiple US Public Health Service (PHS) awards and honors, including the 3 highest honors—the PHS Distinguished Service Medal (1993, 1997, and 2006), the PHS Meritorious Service Medal (1988 and 2003), and the Surgeon General’s Medallion (2013)—and through multiple CDC awards, including the William C. Watson, Jr., Medal in 1996 for his sustained outstanding leadership and scientific excellence in epidemiology and public health surveillance, the Philip S. Brachman Distinguished Friend of EIS Award in 2002, and the Charles C. Shepard Lifetime Scientific Achievement Award in 2009.

Recognized as one of the most prolific writers in public health, Steve authored or coauthored more than 240 papers and textbook chapters and served as the editor of scientific papers and journal supplements on a broad range of public health topics, from epidemiology to public health surveillance, meta-analysis, infectious diseases, environmental public health, injury prevention, sports medicine, alcohol abuse, health care delivery, web development, and technology assessment (http://libguides.phlic.cdc.gov/Thacker). Steve was also known for his extensive knowledge of the CDC’s history, as exemplified by the December 2011 supplement to the American Journal of Epidemiology, which he coedited, in which authors described the 4,484 epidemic-assistance investigations performed throughout the world by CDC’s EIS officers and staff from 1946–2005. He also served as guest editor for the American Journal of Epidemiology’s supplements honoring Alex Langmuir (December 2001) and the 100th anniversary of Tulane University School of Public Health (2012); he additionally served as Editor of Epidemiologic Reviews in 1990–2003. Through his many publications, as well as his mentorship, his influence on public health practice will continue well into the future.

Despite his extensive and impressive professional accomplishments, Steve was a man of uncommon humility. He treated all persons with dignity, honesty, and respect, regardless of rank. His office door was always open to everyone, and throughout his days, he visited the offices of his staff to seek their insight about important matters (“management by walking around”). Perpetually affable despite the long hours he put in both during the week and on weekends, Steve always found time to have friendly chats in the hallway.
about a recently read book, the latest movie he had watched with his family, and especially a hard-fought victory by the girls’ basketball team he coached. Steve served as a source of inspiration and motivation to all those he met through his integrity, dedication, and passion. He is already greatly missed. The CDC Foundation is honoring Steve’s life and service to public health and the Epidemic Intelligence Service at http://www.cdcfoundation.org/what/program/stephen-b-thacker-fund.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Author affiliations: Scientific Education and Professional Development Program Office, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia (Denise Koo); and Office of Noncommunicable Diseases, Injury, and Environmental Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia (Robin Ikeda).

Conflict of interest: None declared.