

Masthead

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## Taking N.C. out of the Stroke Belt

**RALEIGH** Every day, on average, 59 North Carolinians die from heart attack or stroke. This is 59 fathers, mothers, husbands, wives and friends - and for us, it's personal.

A little over a year ago we lost Jim Long, North Carolina's longtime state insurance commissioner, to a stroke. He was only 68 years old. Several years ago, Gov. Beverly Perdue's mother also suffered a stroke and was incapacitated for several years before she died.

For both of us, then, the issues of stroke and stroke prevention are extremely important. Stroke kills and incapacitates the people we love, stroke places a tremendous burden on our state's health care system and, when all is said and done, stroke undermines North Carolina's economic productivity and our ability to compete in a global economy.

For far too long, North Carolina has suffered from higher rates of stroke and heart disease than other parts of the nation. Our state is part of the Stroke Belt, where the rate of death from stroke is substantially higher than the national average. In the eastern counties of our state, known as the "Stroke Belt Buckle," the death rate is twice that of the rest of the nation.

This doesn't have to happen! Our situation is serious, but it is not hopeless. Up to 80 percent of strokes can be prevented and we are making progress in North Carolina.

Our state recognized early on that an aggressive approach was needed to address the challenge of the Stroke Belt. In 1995, the General Assembly established the Justus-Warren Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Task Force to examine North Carolina's increased risk for stroke and heart disease and to begin to lay out a plan for what we could do to reduce the toll these conditions take.

The good news is that as a result of the work of the task force and its partners, heart disease and stroke rates here have declined faster than the United States overall.

The bad news is that heart disease and stroke are still the first and third leading causes of death in our state and also account for the greatest portion of health care costs to the state. Approximately 32 percent of all deaths in North Carolina annually are caused by cardiovascular disease - one death every 22 minutes.

A variety of risk factors can lead to stroke and heart attack - tobacco use, lack of exercise and poor nutrition are clearly contributors to the high incidence of cardiovascular disease in our state. But chief among the preventable and manageable conditions leading to heart attack and stroke is hypertension, also known as high blood pressure. It affects approximately 27 percent of North Carolina adults.

The National Institute of Medicine focused on high blood pressure in its latest report, "A Population-Based Policy and Systems Change Approach to Prevent and Control Hypertension." The report indicates that even though almost one in three adults in the United States has high blood pressure, and it is the second leading cause of death, we are not doing a very good job of combating what the IOM call a "neglected disease."

Fortunately, the report also lays out a comprehensive approach for reducing high blood pressure. It gives us a road map for what we can do to reduce the toll of this silent but deadly killer.

Like so many North Carolinians, both our lives have been touched by the devastating impact of stroke. It is our hope that by bringing attention to the seriousness of stroke and the steps we can take to prevent strokes from happening, including reducing high blood pressure, that we can help other families avoid the loss we have suffered. We believe that working together, we can move our home out of the Stroke Belt and on to a healthier place to live.

Robert Eaves is the husband of Gov. Beverly Perdue. Peg O'Connell is the widow of Insurance Commissioner Jim Long and is a member of the Justus-Warren Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Task Force. Learn more at [StartWithYourHeart.com](http://StartWithYourHeart.com)