**Frank Cerra, M.D.**
Narrator

**Dominique A. Tobbell, Ph.D.**
Interviewer

**INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH INFORMATICS
HISTORY PROJECT**

**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

# INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH INFORMATICS
# HISTORY PROJECT

In 2015, the Institute for Health Informatics (IHI) celebrates the 50th anniversary of health informatics at the University of Minnesota. Early institutional markers serve as the formal beginnings of the emergent discipline of health informatics at the University of Minnesota, designating the University of Minnesota as one of the first academic institutions to support and subsequently anchor the development of the new discipline. In 1965, the National Institute of Health (NIH) Division of Research Resources awarded the University of Minnesota's College of Medical Sciences a grant to establish a Biomedical Data Processing Unit at the University. Two years later, the Hill Family Foundation awarded a ten-year grant to Professor Eugene Ackerman to initiate a graduate research and training program in Biomedical Computing. In 1968, the College of Medical Sciences established the Division of Health Computer Sciences, which would serve as the administrative home for the NIH research resources grant, housed within the Department of Laboratory Medicine. The Division provided interdisciplinary training to pre-doctoral and post-doctoral students applying health computer sciences technology to health services research. In 1974, the University of Minnesota was awarded the prestigious National Library of Medicine Grant for Training in Health Computer Sciences, which formally established the Graduate Program in Health Informatics at the University of Minnesota. The Division and its institutional successor, the Institute for Health Informatics (created in 2006), received continuous training grants from the National Library of Medicine until 2009. For fifty years, the University of Minnesota has been one of the preeminent health informatics institutions in the United States.

The Institute for Health Informatics History Project captures, analyzes, and records the history of health informatics at the University of Minnesota. Through oral history interviews, the Project preserves the personal stories of faculty members and National Library of Medicine administrators who were involved in the early history of the field and have keen insights into the history of health informatics at the University of Minnesota.

# Biographical Sketch

Frank Cerra was born in Oneota, New York in 1943 and grew up in Worcester, New York. He completed his bachelor's degree in 1965 at the Binghamton University - State University of New York (SUNY), his medical degree at Northwestern University Medical School in 1969, and his residency at SUNY Buffalo. Dr. Cerra became a professor of surgery (1975) and a professor of biophysics (1980) at SUNY Buffalo. He also held attending staff and leadership positions at Buffalo General Hospital, Buffalo Veterans Administrations Hospital, and Erie County Medical Center.  He was recruited to the University of Minnesota in 1981 to initiate the surgical Intensive Care Unit service and Surgical Nutrition Service. He served as chair of the Department of Surgery from 1993 to 1995 and Dean of the Medical School in 1995. He became Provost (the position was later renamed Senior Vice President) of Health Sciences in 1996 and again became Dean of the Medical School when the positions of Senior Vice President and Dean were merged in 2008. He retired from the University in 2011.

# Interview Abstract

In this excerpt from part two of a three-part interview for the Academic Health Center Oral History Project, Dr. Cerra discusses the events leading to the establishment of the Institute for Health Informatics.

You can find the full Academic Health Center Oral History Project interview at
http://blog.lib.umn.edu/ahc-ohp/ahc-oral-history-project/2014/12/cerra-frank.html

**Interviewed by Dominique Tobbell, Oral Historian**

**Interviewed for the Academic Health Center, University of Minnesota
Oral History Project**

**Interviewed in Doctor Cerra's Office
in the Phillips-Wangensteen Building**

**Interviewed on August 4, 2014**

Frank Cerra        - FC
Dominique Tobbell    - DT

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DT:  I'm going to jump ahead in time.  Sticking to the interprofessional theme that we've hit upon a few times…  The Institute for Health Informatics is going to be celebrating fifty years in 2015.  I have a vested interest in this question.

[chuckles]

DT:  There's a longer history of Health Informatics at the University, but the Institute itself was established in 2005 in the Academic Health Center.

FC:  I did that.

DT:  You did that, so I wonder if you could talk about why the Institute was established and that process.

FC:  Number one, the Informatics Program that was here was of great stature at one time but had *really* fallen off and we lost the Library of Congress [correctly, the National Library of Medicine] grant and the divorce with Mayo [Clinic] occurred over this.  They gave up the whole issue of health records and the development of electronic health records.  They didn't want to deal with it.  That was kind of one group of happenings.

The other group of happenings was the development of large research databases and the ability to manage whether this was financial data in public health, big epidemiologic studies.  We were involved in six or eight major multi-university agreements, worldwide clinical studies, a lot of the bursting of energy around genomics and the genome.  I said,

"You know, we're not prepared for this. We don't have the information infrastructure to deal with this." So I took it to Yudof, and I said, "What happens here? We have all this information but we have no knowledge about how to really use it. It's all mom and pop stuff. It's all based in databases that can't talk to each other. There's no commonality of fields. There's nothing." So we talked about it and talked about it. Finally, he said, "We need a university-wide genomics program."

So I helped develop that with the faculty. It's got to be university-wide, but the guy that was supposed to work on the University side didn't do anything and it, basically, like everything else, became the health sciences that developed the Genomics Program that everybody used. Then, Engineering came on board, and it began to really work. That led to even greater demands for an information infrastructure. Then, out of the CTSI [Clinical and Translational Science Institute] world—this was the third piece of development—came the initiation of the development of the informatician going way beyond biostatistics, particularly in health informatics, a piece of which was the electronic health record. But how do you deal with all of this data from all of these different institutions and get it to come together in a unified database that you can prospectively fill and do something with so that we can get out of this mess of just dealing with clinical data? That led to the development of the idea that we really need informatics here.

About that time, I was recruiting a new dean in Nursing. Connie had applied and there were a whole bunch of them. Her Ph.D. is in informatics. She's a world-recognized informatician tied into the whole government, yah-dee-ah-dee-yah-duh. I said, "You're coming here as dean but your informatics skills we need."

As part of that, we said, "We need to set up an institute for health informatics and bring together the old program into the new, work with Lael [Gatewood] in the period." That's how we created the Institute for Health Informatics. We kind of got sidetracked here with a couple of faculty for a while, but that seems to be sorting itself out now. So that's where it came from. I think it's been quite successful. It needs the right leader.

Then, out of the CTSA [Clinical and Translational Science Award]… We lost the CTSA the first three times, because we didn't have a well developed informatic infrastructure. The fourth time, we put it together the right way and we got the CTSA.

DT: Which year was that?

FC: Ohhh… I think, actually, it was 2010. It was my last year that we got it. I felt vindicated.

DT: [chuckles]

FC: Initially, it started out and the dean of the Medical School recruited somebody, and it was mainly focused on the Medical School. That didn't sit well, so I had to change the leadership and put together a new team. I brought in Bruce [R.] Blazar on the team and

that's how it got done.  It was a matter of doing what you needed to do to get where we needed to be.  Now, it's one of the best around.

DT:  I saw that the first director of the Institute for Health Informatics was Julie Jacko.

FC:  I was part of her recruitment.

DT:  Can you tell me a bit about her?

FC:  Julie is a very, very bright, dynamic person whose primary degree was engineering, whose major field of interest is a hot area now, which is the interface between what's on the computer and the user of the computer.  That is a red-hot issue.  Part of the failure of the electronic medical record is it was built by techies, not designed by clinicians who have certain patterns of thinking in how they like to see information.  How you put the information on the page, where you use graphics, where you don't, where you can use tables was never considered.  That's the interface she works on.  She came here and did a lot of good work.  She had a lot of good grants and, then, this whole history of her and her husband [François Sainfort] and dual employment and what may or may not have happened at the institution she came from…  It all got resolved, and in the resolution, she and her husband left.  I was gone during the resolution, so I can't give you much information on that.

DT:  Can you elaborate on the other stuff, because I don't know that story about the dual employment?

FC:  She came from…  I'm blanking on it.  Georgia Technical University?  I'll remember, eventually.

DT:  Georgia Institute of Technology?

FC:  No.  It was the one where there was a big shooting.  Georgia Tech, yes!

She and her husband, François…  François was an informatician and was in that area of public health.  Julie came here seventy-five percent time in the Institute for Health Informatics and twenty-five percent time in the School of Nursing.  There were some allegations made that, in fact, they came here on a full salary while they were also achieving a full salary from Georgia Tech.  All of that got put together.  I can tell you what's in the newspapers; I can't tell you what's in the legal files.  That was all public information.  There was supposedly a big lawsuit pending in the attorney general's office in Georgia.  That got dropped.  There was a resolution.  There was a resolution here and they both left.  Was there truth in it?  It is what it is.  I don't know.

DT:  I remember that was happening the first few weeks that I was here.  It may have been when I interviewed here because I couldn't meet with you because…

FC:  It was at the same time.

DT:  …this was happening.

FC:  That's about all I can say about that.

DT:  That's fair enough.  I just knew that there was some controversy that someone had warned me about.

Then, Connie Delaney was appointed as interim director and has been since that time?

FC:  Yes.  Again, the University program has kind of not developed very well, but the program in health sciences has just blossomed.  I think there are probably half a dozen faculty now in Informatics.  They are searching for a new leader, and it's recognized for what it is.

DT:    From  the  predecessor  of  the  Institute,  it's  been  interdisciplinary  and interprofessional from very beginning.

FC:  Yes, very much so.

DT:  Nurse informaticians from…

FC:  Nursing, Pharmacy…

DT:  Public Health.

FC:  Medicine.

DT:  Let's leave it there and we'll set up another time to do the final round.

FC:  Okay.

 [End of the Interview]