Harriet Werley became the first nurse informatician even before the field had been named. In the late 1950s, as the first officially designated nurse researcher at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Werley participated in conferences initiated by IBM to identify data processing needs in health care and the potential for computer applications. She brought to those conferences her understanding of nursing’s need for data to study and improve clinical practice and health care delivery. In 1960, working with the American Nurses’ Association Committee on Nursing Research and Studies to identify priorities for nursing research, she argued for a section in the report concerned with communication and decision making in nursing.

As clinical informatics began to take hold in the 1970s, Werley foresaw the opportunity to reuse clinical data for research and management. Then on the faculty of the University of Illinois College of Nursing, in 1977 Werley collaborated with Margaret Grier to convene an invitational working conference of “individuals knowledgeable about and interested in identifying and computerizing data bases relevant to nursing care.” As an expert on the potential uses of nursing data, Werley was the first nurse to serve on the Health Care Technology study section of the National Center for Health Services Research. During the same period, Werley became the founding editor, with Joyce Fitzpatrick, of Research in Nursing and Health. By 1985, Werley was a distinguished professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Impatient
with the failure of most nurses to grasp the importance of standardized clinical data that could be aggregated and analyzed, Werley, in collaboration with Norma Lang, led efforts to establish a Nursing Minimum Data Set\textsuperscript{4,5} that would include, among other elements, nursing diagnoses, nursing interventions, nursing outcomes, and nursing intensity.

Throughout the 1980s Werley was on the leadership committee of the nursing special interest group at SCAMC, the forerunner of the Nursing Informatics Working Group of AMIA. She also helped to establish the Council on Computer Applications in Nursing at the American Nurses Association.

Werley became a Charter Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing in 1973. The American College of Medical Informatics elected her to fellowship in 1991. In 1994, the American Academy of Nursing designated Harriet H. Werley a Living Legend, a status accorded only to those of the highest professional accomplishment.

With advancing age, even Werley’s energy began to flag, and she confided to colleagues that the 1995 AMIA Fall Symposium would probably be her last. Determined that the founder of nursing informatics would not retire from the field unremarked, the Nursing Informatics Working Group organized special recognition for Werley at the 1996 Fall Symposium and arranged for her to attend. The Werley Award for the paper that made the greatest contribution to nursing informatics was given for the first time, to Rita Zielstorff. Werley was honored at a luncheon and also received a President’s Award at the 1996 Symposium.

Werley’s contributions to nursing research and to nursing informatics helped to shape those endeavors in the 20th Century. Those who knew her, however, will remember her at least as much for her generosity and her wit. The “first nurse” in many contexts, Werley made sure she was not the last. She nominated and encouraged those who would follow her. Whether by sharing her hotel room at SCAMC so that a graduate student could afford to attend, or by nominating a junior colleague to a position that Werley had formerly held, or by reviewing draft proposals and manuscripts with a razor-sharp but unerring critique, or by supporting a nurse informatician for fellowship in an honor society, Werley nurtured the generations that would follow her. In her later years, when osteoporosis had made her frail, Harriet expressed a good-humored frustration that her skeleton had not held up so well as the rest of her. Those of us who had learned from her, those of us who loved her, those of us who had become her children and grandchildren in the profession answered, “Harriet, if you sometimes feel a little bent, it is only because so many of us are standing on your shoulders.”

We miss her already.

References