

A tribute to Branko Cesnik and his life's work

Branko Cesnik was an Australian pioneer and an international leader in Health Informatics, which is the use of information management and information technology to support improvements in the quality and safety of health care. Health informatics was the basis of Branko's academic work and his major contribution to research and to the world's medical knowledge.

Branko graduated as a doctor from Monash University. Following his graduation he worked in training posts in accident and emergency medicine and renal medicine in Australia before spending time working in South Africa. During his early years following graduation he began to appreciate the potential significant impact that new technologies, especially computers, could have on the quality of health care delivery and on the education of doctors and other health care professionals and the general public.

In 1988 Branko was appointed as a Senior Lecturer with the Department of Community Medicine and General Practice at Monash University. I joined the staff at Monash University that same year and I had the great privilege and joy of working closely with Branko over many years. I not only gained an inspirational and very clever colleague and academic partner, but also a lifelong friend.

Under the visionary leadership of Professor Neil Carson AO, Branko went on to establish the first research and education unit for medical informatics in any of the medical school in Australia. At this time he was joined in his work by his future wife, Wendy McPhee. Branko's research focused on innovative ways to use information technology to support medical education and clinical care. Branko's work in medical education innovation received the Monash University Silver Jubilee Teaching Prize in 1993 and, on the basis of his research, Branko was awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine by Monash University in 1995.

In 1995 Branko was appointed as Associate Professor at Monash University and later Branko and Wendy and the members of their unit accepted an invitation to become part of the new Monash Institute for Health Services Research, established by the late Professor Chris Silagy AO. At the institute Branko continued his research activity leading a team of researchers examining innovations in the application of new technology to support clinical care and working with Wendy on the establishment of successful postgraduate training programs for health professionals in health informatics.

My first experience of Branko becoming a world leader in the evolving discipline of medical informatics was in 1989. Branko and I attended a conference of the International Medical Informatics Association in Singapore and Branko created great interest among participants with his vision for the use of multimedia and hypertext principles in medical education. People were amazed at the practical prototype examples he had created to show how this technology could be used in clinical medicine. His vision for the use of IT in health care preceded the widespread development of the World Wide Web and the hypermedia applications which were to appear in the mid-1990s. At that conference Branko was recruited by the World Health Organization's global health informatics leader, Dr Salah Mandel, to assist in

fostering the development of health informatics especially in Australia and the Asia Pacific Region.

In 1991 Branko was one of the founders of the Health Informatics Society of Australia. The Society involves clinicians and IT professionals who shared an interest in the use of information technology to support clinical care. Since its establishment the Society has held an annual health informatics conference which has been instrumental in raising the profile of health informatics and facilitating the development of this discipline in Australia and Branko was often a guest speaker. His presentations were always full of innovation and exciting visions of how IT might transform health care over the years to come.

In 1994 Branko co-founded the Asia-Pacific Association for Medical Informatics becoming its second President from 1997-2000. In 1997 he was responsible for bringing the second conference of the Asia Pacific Association for Medical Informatics to Australia.

In 1999 Branko became a foundation Fellow of the Australian College of Health Informatics. The college aims to raise the academic profile of health informatics in Australia and ensure high standard for education and research and to provide mentoring opportunities to young researchers. Branko was the second President of the Australian College of Health Informatics from 2001-2003.

In 2001 Branko was elected as Vice-President of the International Medical Informatics Association, a mark of the level of respect that he engendered among his peers at an international level. His work helped to ensure that the 2007 conference of the International Medical Informatics Association, Medinfo, would be held in Australia. It will take place in Brisbane in August.

For over fifteen years Branko was a consistent source of wise counsel and support for the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing in the roll out of major health computing initiatives. He was involved especially in supporting the evaluation of health computing in Australian general practice and assisting the Australian Government to ensure that lessons learned from any one project were able to be applied to future developments and investment in this important and growing area of health care.

In recent years Branko also worked for Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council as a member of the Health Advisory Committee and as Chair of the Information Management Framework Committee.

Branko was also appointed by the Australian Health Ministers Council as a member of the National Health Information Group, which is leading the development of electronic health records in each state and territory. He was also appointed as a member of the Electronic Decision Support subcommittee and Workforce Capacity Building subcommittee of the Australian Health Information Council.

In addition to his academic work, Branko worked as a clinician in the Emergency Department of the Knox Private Hospital in Wantirna for many years. In this role he supported the provision of high quality emergency care to the people of that region

and provided training, support and supervision to many young medical graduates. Branko was an insightful clinician and gave me valuable advice on the care of my patients which I still use today.

In early 2005, following the diagnosis of an inoperable brain tumour, Branko retired from clinical practice and academic work, yet he continued to provide advice and support to government and fellow academics and clinicians. He continued to serve as Honorary Professor with the Monash Institute for Health Services Research and as Honorary Professor with the Centre for Health Informatics at The University of New South Wales, led by Professor Enrico Coiera.

In August 2005 Branko's leadership and life work was honoured with the award of Life Membership of the Health Informatics Society of Australia, and Life Membership of the International Medical Informatics Association. These are rarely bestowed honours and they reflect the esteem of Branko's peers in Australia and around the world.

I would like to invite all those who had the privilege of being one of Branko's colleagues or students or workmates to please now stand in tribute to our wonderful friend.

On behalf of Branko's many colleagues and friends here today, and the many people who have sent messages of love and remembrance from around the world, I extend our deepest sympathy to Wendy, to Branko's mum and dad, to Samantha and Tess, to Becky and Mandy and Sam, and to all those family members and friends who grieve for him today. You need to know that Branko made a wonderful contribution through his life's work and that his work is greatly valued.

Branko has made a substantial, important and lasting contribution to Australian and international health care through his role as a researcher, an educator and as a clinician. His many professional and voluntary contributions at a national and international level to the development of standards and education and research have been remarkable.

He was a wonderful friend and colleague and teacher and mentor and was warmly loved by many people in all parts of the world. We loved him for his brilliant intellect and his breathtaking lateral way of thinking. We loved him for the way he challenged us and stretched our thinking. We loved him for his loyal friendship and his wonderful and often wicked sense of humour. We loved him for his strength and courage when he was faced with his own mortality. We loved him because he was a great and caring man who was passionate about life and challenged everyone around him to achieve their very best.

Branko, dear friend, you were one of a kind. We will miss you dreadfully.

Michael Kidd
14.06.07