An oral history project preserves the voices of some who influenced health sciences education in Minnesota.

BY SUZY FRISCH

A shortage of physicians, nurses and dentists. Questions about the cost of a medical education and the best ways to deliver care. Concern that health professionals are too concentrated in urban areas. These pressing worries today were also top of mind in the 1950s and '60s. History does repeat itself.

Today’s researchers and health care policy makers don’t have to imagine what their predecessors thought about these issues. Thanks to the Oral History Project at the University of Minnesota’s Academic Health Center (AHC), they can hear what they thought about and how they responded to the challenges of the day.

“I really believe that history can and should inform contemporary practice,” says Dominique Tobbell, Ph.D., head of the Oral History Project and an assistant professor in the history of medicine program. “There is a lot to learn from the way institutions and individuals handled issues in the past—what was successful and what didn’t work, what choices were made and paths not followed.”

Launched in 2008, the project was a way to preserve the stories of those who helped develop the U’s various health sciences programs—medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, public health, veterinary medicine. Listening to the interviews, we see issues and events through the eyes of the people who told them.

“Being able to speak to individuals who lived through the history adds a human perspective beyond what can be dry institutional records,” notes Tobbell, who says students have used the oral histories for class projects. “Students really connect with it. It makes them realize that what they are reading about in textbooks actually happened. It really gives life to the history.”

Tobbell and her team ultimately will conduct interviews with about 100 people—doctors, researchers, dental hygienists, executive assistants and others—before wrapping up the project this spring.

So far, they have done 85 interviews on a range of topics—from advancements in organ transplantation to the creation of advanced pharmacy degrees. Tobbell was particularly intrigued by the stories about the efforts to save the colleges of Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine in 1987, when a University task force recommend they close for budgetary reasons. She notes that Neal Vanselow, M.D., who was vice president for health sciences at the time, lobbied...
leaders at the U and Legislature to make sure the proposal didn’t go very far.

The oral histories complement the documents, photos and other materials that fill the University’s archives. The transcripts are posted on the Academic Health Center History Project website (http://blog.lib.umn.edu/ahc-ohp/ahc-oral-history-project/about-the-project.html).

**Beyond words on paper**

For oral history participants, telling their stories allows them to take stock of their careers and contributions. Paul Quie, M.D., senior advisor and co-director of the university’s International Medical Education and Research Program, shared memories of his nearly 60 years with the university, which started with residency in 1954. He became a member of the pediatrics faculty in 1958 and later served as chief of staff of the University Hospital and Clinics.

Among other topics, Quie talked about the excitement of being at the U during the 1950s, when medical breakthroughs such as the development of cardiopulmonary bypass were happening. “It’s a good demonstration of never, never, never giving up, and realizing that the heart had never been entered before,” he says. “In retrospect, this was a very heady time to be at the University of Minnesota.”

Sandra Edwardson, a nurse who earned her Ph.D. from the School of Public Health and recently retired after serving as a School of Nursing professor for 34 years and dean for 14 of those, wanted to ensure her school’s 100-plus-year history was well-represented. The U’s School of Nursing was the world’s first university-based school of nursing. She recalled helping create the nurse practitioner program and in 2007 convincing university leaders to add a doctorate in nursing program as well.

“Our school has a unique role in American nursing history,” she says. “I think it’s important to document it for future generations who want to know how these things came to be.”

Suzy Frisch is a Twin Cities freelance writer.

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