The Morris F. Collen Award is given each year, when appropriate, to pioneers in the field of medical informatics who best exemplify the teaching and practice of Morrie Collen. This year’s recipient, Dr. Marion Ball, has devoted her career to building bridges, trying to bridge the gaps that divided countries and regions, professions and disciplines, colleagues and co-workers, public sector and private entities.

Marion Jokl was born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1940, where her parents had settled in 1933 after leaving Nazi Germany. Her father, Ernst Jokl, was an international leader in sports medicine, and her mother was a sports teacher and corrective therapist. Both of her parents were on the 1928 German Olympic team and her mother was a gold medalist in track and field. In 1951, when the oppressive apartheid policy was proclaimed in South Africa, the family quickly left and returned to Germany. In 1952 they immigrated to the United States. In 1953, at the urging of famed University of Kentucky basketball coach Adolph Rupp, Dr. Jokl joined the medical faculty at the University in Lexington to develop a sports medicine program. Both Marion and her younger brother, Peter, graduated from high school in Lexington. Marion, who had attended eight schools on three continents, completed one year at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, before returning to the University of Kentucky where she earned a bachelor’s degree in math and education in 1960. In 1959, at the age of 18, she married Dr. John Ball, who today is professor emeritus of criminology and drug abuse at the University of Maryland. And by 1963, they were the parents of a son, Charles, and a daughter, Elizabeth.

In 1965, Marion took her newly earned Master’s degree in mathematics and went to work as a programmer and instructor at the University of Kentucky, where she helped to install an early-computerized clinical lab system. From there, she went on to Temple University in Philadelphia, beginning in 1968 as assistant director for medical computing activity. In 1972, she was named director of medical computing, a position she held until 1985. While she was director, she also went on to earn her doctorate of education. It was during her time at Temple that Marion initiated the activities that became the linchpin of her professional career.

While there, she began to publish, beginning with How To Select a Computer System for the Clinical Laboratory in 1971, which was followed in 1972 by a children’s book, What Is a Computer?, and then by How to Select a Computerized Hospital Information System in 1973. Each book focused on how computers worked and what they could do. She has since published 24 more titles along with hundreds of journal articles.

While at Temple, Marion began her interdisciplinary activities, developing courses on medical computing with the help of colleagues in medical records administration and nursing. In 1974, she became a member of the National Library of Medicine Biomedical Library Review Committee, the BLRC (now the BLIRC). Over her four years, she made friends for life, including Nancy Lorenzi, Lois DeBakey, Phil Manning, and Don Lindberg. In 1974, Dr. Ball went to Stockholm for a meeting of Technical Committee 4 of the International Federation for Information Processing. The delegates meeting there became the driving force behind the creation of the International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA). In 1978, she was named program chair for IMIA’s first working conference on hospital information systems held in Capetown, South Africa. In her summary address at the conference, she articulated the themes that have shaped her career: That technology is only an enabler; success depends on attention to
human factors and collaboration across boundaries. For Marion, building bridges across boundaries is more than theory. It is how she conducted her professional life.

In order to move theory into practice, Marion left Temple in 1985 for the University of Maryland, one of the first four institutions to receive funding from the National Library of Medicine under its “Integrated Advanced Information Management Systems Initiative” or IAIMS. She joined the faculty and administration at the University’s professional school campus in 1985, where she spent the next 12 years working to make the IAIMS concept a reality. During her tenure there as Vice President and Chief Information Officer, she brought the Health Sciences Library and Information Services together into a single integrated organizational unit. In recognition of her work, the Medical Library Association made her an honorary member in 1996. While at Maryland, she continued her activities on behalf of IMIA. During her term as president from 1992-1995, the Association intensified its own bridge-building, giving life to new working groups, including one on human factors, and to a new regional association, the Asian Pacific Association for Medical Informatics, also known as APAMI.

Beginning at Temple, Marion has pioneered nursing informatics. She was a prime mover in establishing the nursing informatics program at the University of Maryland. Today, she is an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, where she teaches and advises.

The books, Introduction to Nursing Informatics and Nursing Informatics: Where Caring and Technology Meet, both done in partnership with Kathryn Hannah, are standard texts in nursing schools across North America and around the world. Both titles appear in the Health Informatics series she and Dr. Hannah co-edit. It now includes 29 titles, not including multiple editions and translations.

Within academia, Dr. Ball has reached out to other disciplines as well: from dentistry to medical records, laboratory technology and a wide range of medical specialties. She has taught courses, given lectures, developed curricula, and advised every professional level, from doctoral students to program directors. She has also reached out beyond academia by serving on the boards of professional associations such as Health Information Management and Systems Association, the College of Health Information Management Executives (CHIME), and the Microsoft Health Users Group (MSHUG), and as a member of the Board of Regents of the National Library of Medicine. In 1996, she was elected to the Institute of Medicine. In the same year, Marion made a bold decision: she would leave academia. Today, she is Vice President for Clinical Solutions at HealthLink, an international consulting firm exclusively focused on the provider segment of health care.

Dr. Marion Ball is indeed a leader and a doer. Her friends, colleagues, and admirers could fill auditoriums in all corners of the world. Her contributions to the field of medical informatics are extraordinarily valuable. Marion Ball is truly the mother of medical informatics.