

Advocacy Efforts Key to Progress: Member Involvement Needed More than Ever

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by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA

AHIMA's advocacy process continues as we move issues ahead into the new year. There are a variety of issues, appointments, budgets, and more hanging over the heads of our newly elected members of Congress, state legislatures, and federal and state administrators. Advocacy for HIM is also necessary in a number of national and regional industry groups, such as groups involved in education, informatics, and standards. And equally important is member advocacy for HIM.

What's in Store for 2003

Standardization of Coding

2002 ended with several unresolved coding issues. 2003 will be the start of the regulatory process to adopt ICD-10-CM and perhaps ICD-10-PCS for national implementation. There will be notices of proposed rule making seeking your input about coding standards improvements or changes. If the HIM profession is going to realize success in improving coding standards and data, your positive input and support and attention to the details are needed.

Attention must also be given to the ongoing issue of duplicate code elements and requirements. Just what do we do with Gcodes, Q codes, and others that duplicate CPT codes? Will we see HIPAA uniform standards and administrative simplification take precedence over payer desire for proprietary codes? All these questions follow us into 2003.

How these coding consistency issues are addressed will depend on the HIM profession's involvement with input to national decision bodies, state groups, coding clinics, and group meetings as well as with payers and promotion of the AHIMA *Payer's Guide*. The Association will continue its efforts on various editorial boards to ensure the principles we address in our public statements find their way into day-to-day functions. We will also have to address issues such as facility E/M codes and the coding behind our prospective payment systems.

An Information Infrastructure

With the HIPAA transaction and code set requirements final for all by October 16, 2003, there will be plenty of discussion regarding not only these requirements but the entire national healthcare information infrastructure. This will be the year for commitment to the idea of national standards under HIPAA to take flight. How this nation, our government, and our industry address uniformity and acknowledge the cost and value of data will still be a topic of much discussion. This debate will include the acceptance of moving ICD-10 forward.

Congress will be looking at how bioterrorism affects healthcare, as the federal and state governments consider the data and information necessary to support various public health efforts. These discussions will also address the privacy of this information.

The issues of medical errors and patient safety will continue to attract attention. How will we collect and report data to evaluate the problems and come up with resolutions? The answer remains ambiguous when we do not have standardized data at intake or initial service delivery sites.

There is also the question of how the government will keep track of all these information projects and data flows. Timely efforts will be needed to identify these problems, raise them to the appropriate decision levels, and provide good professional recommendations so that resolution takes place. Discussion continues about how we can individually and collectively move to electronic health records and data transmission.

Progress with Privacy

As we approach the implementation of the HIPAA privacy rule in April, discussion continues on how state preemption affects the day-to-day workings of privacy. This issue must be addressed locally and nationally as we deal with conflicts in state and federal regulations and attempt to recognize that HIPAA brought us a floor, not a ceiling, for privacy. Expect to be challenged as these rules come into place, and work with your state and national associations to affect change.

Next, we have to address potential modifications to the rule, the integration of the HIPAA security rule, and other privacy issues that HIPAA has not addressed, such as discrimination. Many believe that 2003 will be a year in which Congress will not want to address such issues, but we as HIM professionals cannot ignore them. While healthcare privacy might not be a priority for Congress, be aware of other privacy issues such as Internet privacy and patients' rights, which may be priorities.

Eye on the HIM Work Force

AHIMA will release significant information regarding the HIM work force in 2003, including where we stand now and where we will be in the future as HIM moves forward as e-HIM. AHIMA will be working with other health organizations and federal officials to see how we can invest in the future of the profession through improving and expanding the education resources, scholarships, and other tools necessary to create qualified professionals.

This is not just a federal issue. As our institutions of higher learning are faced with cutbacks, decisions regarding the demand for HIM education, the content of HIM education, and need for HIM professionals will be made locally. Join the effort to educate the industry, your employers, and other decision makers about the role and need for HIM professionals, now and in the future. Recruiting the next generation of HIM professionals is also essential.

What You Can Do

Advocacy, in relation to the HIM profession, needs the involvement of each individual professional, his/her local associations, and AHIMA. Each of the issues raised above and more will need your input. There are several ways you can be involved.

Stay Informed

Keep up with what is going on in the profession by reading professional publications, your local component state association (CSA) publications, and AHIMA's Web site. Even if you are not aggressively advocating for an issue, you will be prepared to discuss current issues. Besides publications and Web sites, look to AHIMA's Communities of Practice (CoP). It's a great way of keeping up with other professionals that have similar jobs or interests and a means of adding to discussion of issues that can feed into local and national advocacy efforts.

Get Involved

This is a great time of year to take a few minutes and send a note to your state and federal legislators. Welcome them to the beginning of a new legislative year and let them know what you do and what your ideas are. Tell them about your state and national associations. At work, find out what issues are of concern to your employer and what advocacy efforts are under way.

Stay active in your CSA. Many decisions made on a local basis have much more impact on your day-to-day work activities than federal law.

This year AHIMA will sponsor a Capitol Hill Visit Day on April 10. Look for more information soon about how you can come to Washington and let Congress know about you, your profession, and the Association. Included in this event are a review of the issues and advocacy tools and time on Capitol Hill to introduce ourselves and let our Congressional delegates know about what we do and the issues that are important to us.

Help Along the Way

There are a number of tools in addition to those available in the CoP and CSA. Watch for AHIMA's Advocacy Assistant (see "Coming Soon: the AHIMA Advocacy Assistant," below), which will provide you with many tools for a variety of advocacy efforts. Each CSA has also appointed an advocacy liaison who, through the Advocacy Liaison CoP, will have access to software that will keep the liaison and the CSA up-to-date on state legislative and regulatory activities.

Watch for the revision to the Policy and Government Relations (P&GR) section of AHIMA's Web site at www.ahima.org/dc. The revision will include new P&GR issues updates, links to more legislative, regulatory, coding, and standards activities, and links to obtain further information by contacting a specific policy maker, AHIMA volunteer committee, or P&GR staff member. You will also find copies of all AHIMA position statements, testimonies, and comments.

This year offers many challenges and opportunities for the HIM profession to advocate for tomorrow's HIM environment and improve our ability to deliver a broad number of services to the healthcare industry and ultimately to the patient. To reach the point where we have the resources, recognition, and resolution of issues to allow us to do our job effectively, we need each individual to join the various advocacy activities that will show up in 2003. We look forward to your involvement.

Coming Soon: the AHIMA Advocacy Assistant

The AHIMA Advocacy Assistant is undergoing its final stages of production and functionality testing. Once complete and active, the Advocacy Assistant will be accessible to all members through the CoP.

The goal of the Advocacy Assistant is to educate and provide resources to AHIMA members and volunteers, which will allow them to participate as individuals, employees, and AHIMA members in local and national advocacy efforts toward the positive support of the HIM profession. The Advocacy Assistant will be a friendly, interactive, Web-based tool for enabling members and staff to:

- learn about advocacy and government relations from an AHIMA perspective
- access a variety of tools that will allow the individual/CSA/CoP to initiate an advocacy campaign or provide input to the governmental or policy process
- access tools and information to support a national AHIMA advocacy campaign or project
- obtain information on the legislative, regulatory, coding, and standards processes along with their mutual interaction
- obtain links to other sources of information and resources in the advocacy arenas

Resources and tools provided by the AHIMA Advocacy Assistant include:

- sample letters for advocacy efforts and guidelines for advocacy meetings and alliance building
- guidelines for writing and giving testimony accompanied by samples of AHIMA testimony
- critical elements for public and media relations
- software for identifying your federally elected officials and communicating with them to assist AHIMA's federal advocacy efforts
- a key contact list for the administration and federal agencies
- software enabling you to follow each and every bill that AHIMA is working on in Congress along with providing "Action Alerts" that, when necessary, may specifically request your assistance (letter, phone call, e-mail) with a specific public policy matter
- a variety of presentations concerning public policy updates, advocacy, alliance building, and the legislative/regulatory/coding/standards processes

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