

Channeling HIM Skills into a Passion

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by **Anne Zender**, MA, vice president of communications

As a member of AHIMA's E-Health Task Force in 1999–2000 and an early facilitator of AHIMA's e-Health Community of Practice, Lynda Mitchell, RHIA, CPHQ, could see that the Internet had great potential for healthcare and communication. A decade later, the potential has become reality for her and a virtual community.

Mitchell is president of Kids with Food Allergies, Inc. (KFA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing education and a supportive community for children with food allergies and their families. The community exists online via the group's Web site, www.kidswithfoodallergies.org, as well as via social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. In this role, Mitchell finds herself putting her HIM skills to use in ways she never imagined when she began her career.

Mining the Internet

KFA grew out of Mitchell's experiences as a parent of a child with food allergies and her graduate studies in informatics at the College of St. Scholastica. In the 1990s she created an online community via e-mail for other parents of children with food allergies. "Once I got online, I realized how much information was available, and that there was a tremendous pool of parents who needed help," Mitchell says.

At the same time, in graduate school she became aware of how consumers were using the Internet to get health information and how "there was a subset of people who wanted to connect with others." She realized that she was one of those people. "That's what gave me the idea to grow [the organization]."

Armed with a business plan and a needs assessment for the online community, she set about creating "a blueprint for what we were going to do." She filed for incorporation, created a board of directors and a strategic plan, and formed KFA.

Today, the group has 15,000 members. The Web site receives between 60,000 and 70,000 visits per month and up to 30,000 unique visitors per month, she says.

Redirecting HIM Skills

As president Mitchell spends most of her time coordinating and managing virtual teams working on Web development, educational projects, and volunteer management. She's found that she can transfer many of her HIM skills to this role, such as leadership, risk management, and project management.

In addition, she ensures that KFA is a credible source of quality health information. The site has a strong privacy policy and a medical advisory team that approves content, she says.

"My HIM skills helped me better define requirements and make good decisions," she says. For instance, she understood how to use technology for the organization's benefit. "I knew how to work with systems and databases and manage how their processes work."

This helped in setting up systems such as online registration and building an online recipe database. And Mitchell's experience with HIPAA, for example, reminded her that information collected online had to be kept secure and limited to a "need to know" basis.

Looking back on her early e-health work a decade ago, Mitchell says the biggest change is how the Web has evolved to disseminate information and enable people to connect—in real time. The timeliness, she says, is most important for KFA members.

“Food allergy recalls are now on Twitter. You don’t have to wait. That’s a great way to disseminate important information fast,” she says.

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