

Constancy of Change

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by Christina Mayer Duggan

Change is constant in Kathleen Cleary's career and something she welcomes and embraces. Throughout her 15-year medical-records career, she's moved from Wisconsin to California to Texas. Cleary, RHIA, has also helped implement electronic records management systems for two large ambulatory clinics and remodel and move several HIM departments along the way.

In addition to change, there's another constant in Cleary's career—her enthusiasm for the benefits of electronic medical records. “The more information that's available on the patient, and the more readily available that information, the better the quality of patient care.”

Cleary graduated in 1987 from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a bachelor's degree in medical records administration. Wanting to begin her career in a traditional inpatient setting, she accepted a job as supervisor of the HIM department at Milwaukee County Medical Complex, where she worked for nearly two years.

A move to California's Bay Area in September 1989 prompted Cleary to accept a position as assistant director at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation (PAMF), a large ambulatory clinic with four satellite offices. After four years she advanced to director.

Responsible for 60 employees, Cleary managed approximately 170,000 active records for the main office and satellite locations. She also served as president of Ambulatory Information Management, part of the California Health Information Association.

“Initially we worked with a paper-based system—multiple chart pulls, multiple competing appointments,” she says. “One central record would travel wherever the patient was.” Soon, Cleary concentrated on quality-improvement initiatives, and the organization transitioned to an electronic bar-code chart-tracking system.

In 1999 PAMF decided to transition to an electronic medical records system. Selecting a vendor took six years. One satellite served as the pilot, and eventually the other offices were added. “The new system was wonderful,” Cleary says. “I had reached a point [under the previous system] where going to work wasn't fun anymore. We were always behind, we couldn't catch up, charts were in constant motion. Electronic medical records created efficiency and improved patient care.”

After nine years at PAMF, Cleary moved with her husband in February 2001 to Austin, TX, where she is now the HIM director and privacy officer at the Austin Diagnostic Clinic (ADC), a large ambulatory care clinic. ADC has four satellite offices, approximately 125 providers, and 200,000 active records. Cleary manages a staff of 35.

When she first began the job, the medical records were paper-based, and ADC was in the beginning phase of implementing electronic records.

One year into the implementation, they stopped filing progress notes, radiology reports, letters, prescription refills, and telephone encounters into the paper chart because the information was available in the electronic record. “Now all exam rooms have PCs, as do the nurses' stations and doctor's offices—the EMR is visible and useable to all,” she says. “Using a paper-based system meant that only one person could view the record at a time, but now the e-record is readily available.”

Implementing new technology meant training her staff. “I love teaching network processes, how to use the EMR, and how to integrate the EMR into work flows,” she says. “I teach my staff how to do their current work with a new tool.” She also tries to make learning fun, promote from within, and keep the organization's future vision alive for her staff.

In October 2003 ADC began a pilot in which providers select clinically significant documents to be scanned into the electronic medical record. The scanning program benefits because more information will be readily available.

Learning and listening have added to Cleary's continued success. "I read a lot—*Journal of AHIMA, Health Data Management, Modern Healthcare*." She also attends AHIMA conventions, educational seminars, and monthly meetings with clinical managers and administration, where ideas and opportunities are discussed. "It's important to listen to the needs of those in my organization," Cleary notes.

Networking with other HIM professionals is important to Cleary, but looking beyond HIM is crucial, too. "I talk to people in the MIS department, business services, nursing services, and risk management. When the insurance auditors are here, I ask them what's new and interesting in their field, too. Being informed in other areas helps me do my job."

—Christina Mayer Duggan

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