

Corrections Connection

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by Anne Zender, MA, editor

During his work day, Mark Barnard, ART, performs functions similar to HIM professionals in other settings: processes medical records, enters data, and responds to requests for information. But for Barnard, there also is an important difference. Namely, the people whose health information he manages are patients, but they also are prisoners.

Barnard is a health information technician at the Federal Correctional Institution in Tucson, AZ, a medium-security facility that is part of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Barnard works in the health services unit on the grounds of the prison.

As the only HIM professional in the health services unit, Barnard finds that he is busy with the typical duties that occupy his colleagues everywhere. He also is responsible for more large-scale HIM-related projects, such as an audit done by the bureau's central office every three years and regular Joint Commission surveys. What's more, he continually is striving to improve processes in his department. "Our mission is to be service oriented," he says. "We try to find ways to simplify operations and make the office run more efficiently. I recently cut out a double log-in step in our ROI processes; this was a good way to streamline processes."

A Unique Environment

While Barnard carries out a number of HIM duties, the corrections setting has some unique features that make his job different. For instance, reimbursement does not play an important part in health information processing, because prisoner healthcare is paid for by the government. "There are no DRGs, APGs, or Medicare rules to deal with," he says. Accordingly, coding is less important and instead health information is processed using a tool called an outpatient morbidity classification sheet. "This medical data entry form lists the most common diseases and their ICD-9 codes," Barnard says. "The provider circles the appropriate disease and this information is entered into our computer system." The bureau's central office in Washington, DC, collects and analyzes this data.

This computerized data is a first step in the federal corrections system's gradual move toward an electronic medical record, Barnard says. Eventually, exam rooms will have terminals where patient information can be entered at the point of service. While this transformation won't happen overnight, input from Barnard and other HIM professionals in the system will play a part in its development. "It's a big challenge," Barnard says, "but the EMR is the wave of the future."

Barnard joined the bureau in 1991. He previously had worked in acute care and psychiatric facilities, but he found that running an HIM department on his own offered a number of new challenges. And though he works in a prison, he isn't worried about his personal safety. "I was a bit nervous about safety when I began working here, but the bureau does an excellent job training its staff. I feel quite safe in this environment," he says.

Seizing Opportunities

Barnard also has had opportunities to share his HIM expertise with colleagues. Periodically he travels to other prisons to work as a consultant. "I find those trips rewarding," he says. "They force me to use skills I don't normally use." He also has served on the bureau's health record work group, composed of employees who plan and implement changes for the organization nationally.

Barnard also takes advantage of opportunities to network with HIM professionals in other settings, mostly at state and national conventions. "When you do the same work for a while, it's easy to feel stagnant. I think it's important to search for new challenges and solutions and to network with others," he says.

Although the corrections setting has a lower profile as a place of employment than other areas, Barnard says there is plenty of opportunity to be found for HIM professionals. "Most correctional institutions in the bureau have one or two health information technicians in their medical departments, but most of these positions are noncredentialed," he says. "The bureau is growing and new prisons are opening. We need to promote HIM in this setting and educate others about the value of the work so we can attract credentialed individuals."

As for Barnard, he's proud of his job. "In most places, the staff come to work thinking they work for a boss or for a company," he says. "I like to think that I work for the people of the United States, and it is a privilege to work for the people."

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