

Discovering HIM in South Africa

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by Meg Featheringham, assistant editor

When asked how she came to be in her current position at the Wits University Donald Gordon Medical Center in Johannesburg, South Africa, Erin Truter, RHIA, admits that she “was in the right place at the right time.”

Although now a long way from the US, Truter began her career as an operations manager in the HIM department of Genesis Healthcare System in Zanesville, OH. Although only 23 years old at the time, Truter managed a staff of 27 employees. “I learned a great deal from that experience about people; how to gain someone’s trust, how to say that I am sorry, and how to broker compromise. It was difficult but invaluable experience for me to learn how to be a part of a team.”

Continuing her HIM career in the US, Truter worked as a data collector reviewer for Ohio KePRO in Seven Hills, OH. However, it was her marriage to a South African that would take her halfway across the world.

Finding HIT in South Africa

In her first job in South Africa, Truter worked for a third-party administrator who had a claims administration contract for four companies in Virginia. “I played an integral role in training the South African team to understand the American healthcare system,” she explains.

Now, in her role as health information, IT, and voice and data manager, Truter is in the process of developing the IT and voice and data departments for the Donald Gordon Medical Center. “When I stepped into my current role, no one was working to create these two departments,” she says.

As a part of this new endeavor for her organization, funds have been allocated for training staff overseas. “I coordinate the team of people who select opportunities and candidates for this scholarship,” she explains.

Culture Shock

Truter experienced a bit of culture shock when she moved to South Africa. “Most South Africans do not enjoy the basic employment rights that exist in the United States,” she says. “I am required to wear a uniform. I refer to certain people by their titles instead of by their first names. In general, the workplace is more formal in South Africa.”

When asked about the differences between HIM in the US and South Africa, Truter says, “The biggest difference is that healthcare organizations place very little importance on medical records in South Africa. For example, the information that is gathered during a patient’s stay at my organization is used primarily for billing purposes. We do not have a unique patient identifier, and every visit record is kept separately for each patient.” Hospital records are usually kept with the credit controller, Truter explains.

However, she sees the South African healthcare system depending more and more on health information. “Health insurance companies are beginning to enter into contracts with hospitals to pay based on diagnosis-related groups. The health insurance industry is tightening up, and I feel that the time is coming when health insurance companies will demand documentation before reimbursing a healthcare provider.”

Looking back at her path, Truter is amazed at where her career has taken her. “I sometimes sit back and think about where I was a year ago or five years ago, and I would never have imagined myself in this role,” she says.

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