

Documentation Coordinators Put it All Together

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by Jessica Squazzo, assistant editor

There are very few medical records departments that have a position as unique as mine,” says Karen Santoro, documentation coordinator at Banner Thunderbird Medical Center in Glendale, AZ. The fact that many organizations don’t have a documentation coordinator position on their rosters should come as a surprise, however, given the benefits one can provide.

All About Variety

Santoro’s main duty is to review her facility’s documentation to make sure it’s in compliance with Joint Commission and other regulatory standards. She also conducts clinical pertinence reviews and coordinates corrective action for poor documentation. She has been at her position for nearly two years.

Staci Sudberry, RHIA, CCS, concurrent documentation coordinator/educator, performs the same function at Integris Health in Oklahoma City, OK. Her position description lists training, managing, coordinating workflow processes, and managing and leading the concurrent documentation processes and staff as some of the primary functions of a documentation coordinator. The position was created at Integris in August 2002.

Education is also an important part of the job. Both Sudberry and Santoro are in charge of educating physicians, case managers, and coders alike. The documentation coordinator position is obviously not just reviewing charts, although that does factor into the equation. Rather, the position is all about variety.

“You work a lot on your own,” says Santoro. But, she says, “there’s only one you,” as opposed to a room full of 10 other coders, who would be there to help when questions arise. But Santoro insists, “You do get the best of both worlds.” She says she works with people from many of her facility’s departments. “It’s always something different every day.”

Clinical, Coding Foundation Helps

Both Santoro and Sudberry agree that a background in clinical and coding knowledge is beneficial to this role.

“The clinical and coding background really does complement the position,” says Sudberry. Before her current position, she worked in compliance for four years, and prior to that worked in coding and DRG coordination. She is in nursing school now and in December she will earn her RN.

Santoro’s background is primarily in record completion. Her last position was coordinator of Banner’s physician-incomplete area. She has also worked as a technician, coordinator, and in management positions, as well as having analyzed “many, many, many records” throughout her career.

Strong presentation and facilitation skills, motivational and organizational skills, knowledge of payer guidelines, and the ability to interact with multiple departments are also helpful to the position, according to Sudberry. Santoro adds, “Getting the big picture is probably the biggest key to success in this job. This job has definitely made me look at the big picture—a lot.”

Turning on the Light Bulb

With every job comes a number of challenges. For a documentation coordinator, showing employees outside HIM the importance of good documentation is one of them. “My big challenge is to teach that documentation is not just part of patient care, it is patient care,” says Santoro.

According to Sudberry, it's important to teach medical staff the value of the medical record. "[This position] opened up the lines of communication. Physicians feel like they have a contact person now," she says. The reverse is also true. Coders and case managers are in the charts daily and can identify educational opportunities in real time, according to Sudberry. These two groups also feel like they have a contact person, and their questions can be referred to the documentation coordinator.

Sudberry's favorite part of her job is "when I can see the light bulb go on," she says "I have physicians who can speak to me in codes," she adds, proudly.

A Much-needed Role

Not all of the nation's healthcare facilities are taking advantage of this emerging role. According to Santoro and Sudberry, the duties of the documentation coordinator are often divided among other employees whose work loads are already stretched too thin, including HIM directors, who often bear the weight of additional documentation duties.

"I'd like to see reviewing records be more of a centralized effort," says Santoro. "If we could just coordinate these documentation efforts, we would realize that we could save time and money." But for now, it may be a question of just that—money—and the ability to hire more full-time employees. "For average size or larger hospitals it can be done," she says. For smaller facilities, it may be less of a possibility.

As guidelines and regulations become more strict and expansive, the need for this position will become even more evident, according to both documentation coordinators. "We are becoming more and more bound by regulations," Santoro says. Adds Sudberry, "They'll have to dedicate a full-time employee to it."

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