

# Documentation Detectives: Data Integrity Specialists Track Down Data Gone Bad

Save to myBoK

by Chris Dimick

---

*Electronic record systems can compound errors quickly. When they do, it's time to call in the detectives.*

---

When information goes bad, Exempla Healthcare employees turn to documentation detectives—data integrity specialists who ensure that corrupted records are caught and corrected.

From sorting misfiled information out of a patient's record to resolving data problems associated with medical identity theft, the specialists' job is focused on keeping electronic data honest.

Exempla, which operates three hospitals and several clinics in the Denver, CO, area, was a pioneer in creating the new data integrity role. As more hospitals implement electronic health record (EHR) systems, the demand for data integrity specialists will only grow, according to Barbara Manor, RHIA, director of HIM at Exempla. This offers a fresh opportunity for HIM professionals looking to find their niche in a world of ever-increasing electronic records management.

## A New Role for New IT

Exempla Healthcare created its data integrity specialist positions in 2005 after opening its third hospital, Exempla Good Samaritan Medical Center.

As multiple new electronic systems began feeding data into the health record, Good Samaritan initially experienced a high amount of data integrity issues that made the need for a data integrity specialist position apparent. Central to the problem was the facility's document imaging system.

"We had records being scanned to the wrong patient, we had documents that would be indexed to the wrong document type," Manor says. Good Samaritan's new EHR system added to the data problem.

"The EHR system we implemented was new to the inpatient system, and we found it was really easy to pick the wrong encounter and document on it. So if someone picked the wrong encounter, you could have a lab result attached to that wrong visit," Manor says. "Or you could pick an incorrect patient and begin documenting on that wrong patient, mixing two patients' records together. There were a lot of variables tied to data integrity, and it really resulted in a lot of potential patient safety issues."

Exempla officials needed full-time HIM professionals dedicated to sorting out and fixing documentation errors. Initially, two data integrity specialists were hired at Good Samaritan to help resolve the errors. After seeing the positive effect that the specialists had on data integrity, Exempla created new data integrity specialist positions at its other two hospitals.

## The Buck Stops Here

Moving documents that have been indexed to the wrong document type in the document imaging system is just one data integrity specialist job duty. Many EHR systems make it easier for hospital staff to create duplicate medical record numbers for a patient, Manor says. Sorting out these duplicate medical record numbers, which can be done by carefully combining patient information into one record, is a major task of a data integrity specialist.

“As we are getting more electronic, there are more downstream systems combining patient information into one record that you have to deal with, such as lab systems or radiology systems,” Manor says. “So you have to have someone who can go in and correct those duplicate medical record numbers directly and then identify what other systems might be affected by that downstream.”

Sorting out the medical record mess that comes with a medical identity theft case also falls on the data integrity specialist’s shoulders. “You somehow have to figure out what documentation belongs to the correct patient and what information belongs to the fraudulent patient,” Manor said.

## Data Detecting in Real-Time

Data integrity specialists may have to work quickly, analyzing data discrepancies in real-time to assist care. Landsbach describes a possible clinical scenario in which a data integrity specialist is called on to sort through information in a hurry.

“Sometimes a clinician calls up and says, ‘Hey, I am looking at this record. I have this guy in the ED, and it looks like he has a psych history,’ for example, ‘and I don’t see that in the record. Is this record really his? Because I see some diagnoses that don’t seem to match.’

“They are in a hurry so they hang up, and it is up to the data integrity specialist to start weeding through the record and say, yeah, they have a point here. That is where an education of knowing the content of the record comes in use. So you can say, this doesn’t make sense that this person would have these diagnoses.

“So [the data integrity specialist] starts digging further and finds, ‘Oh OK, on these two records these people don’t even have the same birth date.’ Now we have an issue here. That would bring into the light that there are two records with that person’s same name, which would lead to actually correcting it.”

The data integrity specialist role is mainly reactive. When patients or clinical or HIM staff notice a problem in a record they notify the data integrity specialist to correct the problem.

But some data integrity specialist work is proactive. Data integrity specialists keep track of the various data mistakes they handle and use that information to correct both human and EHR system misfiles and mistakes.

Prior to the creation of the data integrity specialist role, it sometimes took several HIM professionals and medical system administrators to correct an integrity problem at Exempla. Data integrity specialists now handle this task, simplifying the process and leading to better data management system-wide, according to Grant Landsbach, RHIA, who was one of the first data integrity specialists hired at Exempla. Landsbach has since been promoted to the role of senior application analyst.

“One thing that has been nice about the data integrity specialist is they are trained to reconcile a problem across multiple software applications,” Landsbach says.

“In the past if there was a problem, the problem would be identified by someone in one application, and they would have to contact the system administrators of the other applications to have them make the change in the corresponding software,” he explains. “But [data integrity specialists] are trained to reconcile a problem from start to finish throughout multiple applications.”

By streamlining the correction process, Exempla has improved its data quality and sped up the correction process. “We can respond to issues a lot more quickly, and that helps prevent any kind of adverse patient incidents,” Manor says. Having the data integrity specialists identify error trends has also helped. The trends and error observations are converted into specific staff training at Exempla, which reduces repetition of errors at the source.

## A Home-grown Position

Since Exempla was one of the first in the country to define the position, Manor and the HIM department molded the duties of their data integrity specialist from a home-grown review of their own data integrity needs (see [job description below]).

## Exempla's Job Description

When Exempla Healthcare created a data integrity specialist role in 2005, it was one of the first in the country to define the position. The HIM department established the duties from a review of its own data integrity needs. Following is an abbreviated description of the job and its requirements.

### Job Summary

Review, research, and resolve problems and errors concerning the medical record number, the electronic health record, the paper health record, and the Exempla hospital information system databases. Perform all duties necessary to maintain the integrity of the enterprise master person index (EMPI) data in the Exempla hospital information system (HIS). Perform all duties necessary to maintain the integrity of the Exempla electronic medical record data. This is done to preserve the integrity of the patient's medical information, which may result in increased patient safety.

### Job Functions

1. Research and resolve problems such as fraudulent chart use, multiple patients' information in one health record, and one patient with two or more health records. This requires comparing demographic information; researching the medical chart history to obtain patient complaint, diagnosis, and treatment; and using the information to help determine if the charts may belong to the same or different patients or if potential fraudulent use has occurred. Take appropriate steps to correct the paper health record, the electronic medical record, and any affected databases. Make addendum in the electronic record by following proper procedures. Notify all affected departments.
2. Monitor and maintain accuracy and completeness of the EMPI in the HIS.
3. Supersede incorrect medical record numbers in the HIS. This involves reviewing, removing, and transferring various types of information to the correct medical record number on the HIS database.
4. Work with Exempla partners to resolve medical record number issues and discrepancies.
5. Verify the validity of reported duplicate medical record numbers and perform merges and reconciliation of duplicate medical record numbers electronically. Correct demographic information in the HIS for all identified and verified duplicate medical record number assignments. Compile daily report of duplicate numbers issued, reason for duplicate, and distributes per procedure. Distribute report to departments and downstream systems to ensure that related data in departmental systems are corrected and up to date.
6. Monitor misfiles. Research and resolve the misfile problem by working with the appropriate clinical staff to ensure medical information is properly moved (and wrong information flagged).
7. Research and resolve multiple patients information in one medical record (overlay). Perform reconciliation of overlaid data in electronic systems.
8. Recommend improvements and assist in troubleshooting, testing, and debugging of new or modified system features. Work with IT staff and department management to implement improvements.
9. Validate data integrity during and following scheduled and unexpected downtimes. This involves working with the staff of emergency department, triage staff, registration staff, and clinical staff during off-hours.

As more hospitals migrate to EHR systems, more data integrity specialists will be needed, Manor says. "It is much easier for errors to hide in electronic records," she notes. "I think in a lot of hospitals, you don't have just one electronic health record system. You have multiple applications that all tie together to become the health record."

Data integrity specialists must know how to navigate a hospital's different documentation systems to find documents, and they must also know the proper content of those documents in order to spot errors, Landsbach says. HIM professionals trained to understand the technical system make the best data integrity specialists, he believes.

Manor points out that corrections to a record can sometimes not be reversed, making it very important that data integrity specialists are highly knowledgeable and precise in their changes.

## An HIM Role to "Strive For"

Landsbach worked scanning and indexing documents prior to taking the data integrity specialist position at Exempla in 2005. Nearing the completion of his RHIA degree, he saw the new position as a great opportunity to learn the technical aspects of the health record and advance his career.

Pride came easily with the new job. “Anything you do to resolve patient safety issues is a great thing. I felt very passionate about it,” he says. “It shouldn’t be hard for anyone to think about these patients as being their mom or grandma, whose information is maybe mixed up with someone else’s or is a victim of identity fraud. This is a very important job.”

There was never a lack of work, and Landsbach’s knowledge of Exempla’s system soon evolved to the point he could help preemptively prevent errors from occurring in the EHR system.

Those HIM professionals looking to transition to data integrity specialists should have good critical-thinking skills, sharp problem-solving abilities, and be very detail oriented, Manor says.

“You really need to be a good detective to like this kind of job,” she explains. “To correct a problem, there is so much you have to be able to work through-the different systems and applications.” Good communication skills are also vital, as data integrity specialists routinely talk to other hospital departments and even clinicians when figuring out how to correct a record.

Exempla prefers its data integrity specialists have an associate degree in health information technology, computer science, or business; two years experience in an HIM department or in the administrative or business area of healthcare; acute care hospital experience; successful completion of a medical terminology course; and RHIT credentials.

While the implementation of an EHR system simplifies some HIM roles, it can create new positions like data integrity specialist that offer HIM professionals an opportunity to advance their careers, Manor says. “This is a great career opportunity for people in the HIM world. It is a higher level, professional position that people could strive for.”

**Chris Dimick** ([chris.dimick@ahima.org](mailto:chris.dimick@ahima.org)) is staff writer at the **Journal of AHIMA**.

---

**Article citation:**

Dimick, Chris. "Documentation Detectives: Data Integrity Specialists Track Down Data Gone Bad" *Journal of AHIMA* 78, no.8 (September 2007): 48-52.

---

## Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.