Ethics Update: Revisions Strengthen AHIMA's Code of Ethics

By Sheila Hart-O'Connor

A new update to AHIMA's Code of Ethics addresses recent changes in technology, healthcare, and association management-and the accompanying complexity of competing interests and obligations they can bring.

All who hold AHIMA's credentials are responsible for performing their roles in accordance with AHIMA's Code of Ethics. The code's core values-such as upholding the individual's right to privacy-are a constant, but the code requires periodic review to ensure its guidance reflects and addresses the current healthcare environment. The industry has undergone unprecedented change in recent years, and last year AHIMA's Professional Ethics Committee brought forward updates to the code to ensure HIM professionals did not find their circumstances outside its jurisdiction.

Over the course of 18 months from 2010 to 2011, members of the ethics committee worked to understand current issues facing HIM professionals. Committee members arranged conference calls and review sessions with AHIMA Communities of Practice, delegates, educators, attendees at AHIMA events, and the board of directors. After incorporating the feedback from these communities and meetings, the committee submitted an updated code to the AHIMA House of Delegates, which approved it October 2, 2011.

What's New with the Code

Built on the code's existing principles and guidelines, which were last updated in 2004, the new version responds to a number of topical changes in technology, healthcare, and association management. In addition, it incorporates what the ethics committee learned in reviewing recent ethics violations and inquiries.

The new code addresses these circumstances with stronger, more specific language. It includes both new and strengthened guidelines and is designed to assist HIM professionals in raising their ethical standards "regardless of their professional functions, the settings in which they work, or the populations they serve," as described in the code's introduction. Additionally, the new code provides enhanced steps for reporting individual, unprofessional actions.

"Our ultimate goal was to create a code of ethics that outlines the inherent ethical responsibilities all members possess who work with health information and with health information management professionals," says 2011 committee chair Dana C. McWay, court executive/clerk of court, US Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, St. Louis.

"First, we reordered the principles and guidelines so that they follow each other. Second, we strengthened the guidelines for [various] principles. Third, we moved the section called 'Use of the Code' to the end of the document. Fourth, we updated the references."

It is imperative that all HIM professionals learn about, understand, and employ the revised code in their daily work routines. As the principles and guidelines of the new code of ethics suggest, making peers and colleagues aware of these updates is also critical to successful, industry-wide implementation.

The Code's Eleven Principles

Eleven principles form the foundation of AHIMA's Code of Ethics. Guidelines further define and support each principle.

1. Advocate, uphold, and defend the individual's right to privacy and the doctrine of confidentiality in the use and disclosure of information.
2. Put service and the health and welfare of persons before self-interest and conduct themselves in the practice of the profession so as to bring honor to themselves, their peers, and to the health information management profession.
3. Preserve, protect, and secure personal health information in any form or medium and hold in the highest regard the contents of the records and other information of a confidential nature, taking into account the applicable statutes and regulations.
4. Refuse to participate in or conceal unethical practices or procedures.
5. Advance health information management knowledge and practice through continuing education, research, publications, and presentations.
6. Recruit and mentor students, peers, and colleagues to develop and strengthen professional workforce.
7. Represent the profession accurately to the public.
8. Perform honorably health information management association responsibilities, either appointed or elected, and preserve the confidentiality of any privileged information made known in any official capacity.
9. State truthfully and accurately their credentials, professional education, and experiences.
10. Facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration in situations supporting health information practice.
11. Respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person.

The full code of ethics is available at www.ahima.org/about/ethicscode.aspx. It features a preamble that describes the ethical obligations and explains the code's six purposes. It also describes how to use the code and provides guidelines to assist members in interpreting its principles. A self-assessment and further case studies are available.

An Overview of New and Strengthened Guidelines

To expedite the process, here is an overview of what has been revised in the code and how it assists AHIMA members and certificants in maintaining their values and ethical adherence:

- Principle III (Guideline 3.1)-Strengthened guidelines prevent inappropriate use of electronic and written information and address HIPAA concerns.
- Principle IV (Guidelines 4.2, 4.6–7, 4.9)-New and strengthened guidelines, including a reference to the professional ethics committee's policies and procedures, help the committee, members, and consumers navigate issues that may include a potential ethics violation.
- Principle VI (Guidelines 6.3, 6.5–7)-New and strengthened guidelines encourage all members to actively recruit and mentor students, peers, and colleagues; establish fair work practices; and develop colleagues' skills and knowledge.
- Principle VIII (Guidelines 8.1, 8.2–5, 8.7)-New and strengthened guidelines provide further support for operations within the association bylaws and policies and procedures, accurate representation of the official and authorized positions of the association, and the association one is volunteering for and the duties one is performing.
- Principle IX (Guideline 9.4)-A new guideline enforces accurate reporting of continuing education units.
- Principle X (Guidelines 10.2–4)-New guidelines further delineate HIM professionals' roles in the work place.
- Principle XI (Guidelines 11.3–4)-New guidelines help foster inclusion among members.

Considering the pace of change in the current HIM industry, these updated guidelines will provide the increased support that is needed to strengthen the application and purpose of the code. They empower all HIM professionals to think, act, and react in a way that upholds the reputation of AHIMA and its membership.

Most importantly, the new code acknowledges that each and every AHIMA member and certificant plays a distinct, essential role in securing a prominent future for health information management.

The updated code of ethics, including more information and additional resources, is available at
www.ahima.org/about/ethicscode.aspx.

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