

Evolution of Coding Information/Resources to an Organization-wide Portal Site

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By Sally Gibbs, MA, RHIA, CCS

How does a healthcare system with 24 hospitals, 40 physician offices, and 50 free-standing ambulatory surgery centers that spans from the entire state of California to just over the Oregon border continue to keep their coding and billing staff current with the latest coding guidelines and regulations? By implementing a 21st century solution using an intranet to keep staff informed.

Over the past three decades the Sutter Health system has grown to its current geographical size and number of facilities through purchases of hospitals and medical office buildings as well as contracting with local physicians. There are over 4,500 physicians under contract who provide patient care and a total of 50,000 employees—including more than 200 who are either hospital-based ICD-10 and CPT coding professionals or professional fee coders. Other employees who work with code sets are the system's revenue cycle staff, clinical documentation specialists, and various analysts for patient quality and financial departments.

In this business setting it is important to have a communication plan that involves getting coding and billing guidance and information out quickly to everyone who needs it, as well as storing it in a place within the healthcare system where anyone can access it 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

As a solution to address this need, Sutter Health employs a portal site, the Affiliate Coding Operational Resource Network (ACORN), to disseminate the information. ACORN serves as a knowledge base for coding, billing, revenue cycle, compliance, and legal professionals.

ACORN Portal Welcome Page

General Information	
<i>This section offers links and documentation to assist ACORN users regarding general information</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About ACORN • About Ethics & Compliance Services (ECS) • Helpful Links • Web Links (regulatory, OIG work plan, etc.) 	<p>How to use the ACORN portal:</p> <p>Are you unable to locate the information you are looking for, click here for instructions on how to use the search function in ACORN. If you still can't find what you are looking for click here to contact ACORN.</p> <p><i>(Click "Open" when asked if you want to open or save the document. An email form will be opened for you to fill out.)</i></p>

ACORN Information Sections

<p>Frequently Asked Questions (Coding FAQ's)</p> <p><i>This section provides a variety of frequently asked coding and billing questions with our responses and advice</i></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acute Rehabilitation • Billing • Chargemaster (CDM) • Coding • Foundations • Home Health/ Hospice/DME/SNF • Inpatient Hospital • Outpatient • Payments • ICD-10 	<p>Toolkits & Instructions</p> <p><i>This section provides tools and instruction sets for various operational procedures intended for use at the affiliate and clinical levels</i></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Billing/Charging Tools • CDI Tools • Coding Tools • Forms/Templates • Miscellaneous Instructions • NCD/LCD • Toolkits - All 	<p>Resources & Education</p> <p><i>This page offers a variety of in-depth information to assist ACORN users in their various roles</i></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical Definitions • Coding Policies & Guidelines • Compliance Risk Alerts • Education Courses • ICD-10: SH Transition Page • Know Do Shares • Policies (PolicyStat)
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ACORN Search Tool

Below is an example of a search performed for an infusion therapy decision tree in the ACORN portal.



The screenshot shows a search interface with a dropdown menu set to 'This Site: ACORN' and a search box containing 'decision tree infusion therapy'. A 'Go' button is next to the search box. Below the search box, it says 'Try searching again in Search Center.' The results section shows '1-8 of 8 results' and a list of search results. The first result is titled 'Initial Service Code Selection for One IV Site (Hospital-Based)' and includes a PDF document titled 'Infusion Decision Tree March 8 2013 (00341362).PDF ... orders a Therapeutic, Chemotherapy, Hydration Infusion or IVP Treatment Did Patient receive Chemo Therapy? Did ...'. The authors listed are Sklar, Joyce, Gibbs, Sally and the date is 1/15/2016. The size is 278KB.

Why Have a Portal Site?

The portal site provides a source of information that supports and encourages appropriate coding and billing by providing:

- Guidance on what type of chart documentation is considered sufficient for various code assignments
- Easy access to system-wide published coding and billing documents such as Compliance Alerts, Local Coverage Determinations (LCDs), National Coverage Determinations (NCD), and links to coding and billing resources
- Easy access to frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- A quick link to submit a question via ACORN

The ACORN portal site is managed by the Ethics and Compliance Services' Documentation and Data Quality (DDQ) Team. The DDQ Team consists of five team members who have a combination of extensive health information management, coding, billing, reporting, and/or project management backgrounds. The team's mission and responsibilities are to provide guidance,

education, and information on all things related to patient care discharge (coded) data that is used for reimbursement, regulatory reporting, and decision support. Recently, the ACORN site was redesigned based on users' comments and recommendations. The DDQ Team has attempted to make it as user-friendly as possible. The welcome page message is available in the graphic above as an example.

The team also added new groupings of information sections to select from in order to further enhance the ease of the user experience. This is shown in the graphic above titled "ACORN Information Sections."

When a user clicks on one of the blue font headings in the FAQ section, they are directed to all the questions submitted and answered about that subject. The Toolkits and Instructions section provides various types of guidance and advice on topics such as coding sepsis, infusion therapy, physical therapy billing rules, and numerous NCD/LCDs. Under the Resources and Education section there are tools that support clinical definitions of various disease processes (created by physicians to assist the clinical documentation specialists and coding staff), numerous training courses, compliance alerts, and links to policies.

If the user is not sure if their topic or an answer to their question is on the ACORN site, they can use the search button to scan the site. In the example graphic above, a search for an infusion therapy decision tree was performed and the search found eight items that have infusion therapy noted in the documents on ACORN. If after running a search on the ACORN site the user can't find any information that will answer their question, the next step is to submit their question to ACORN via a link on the Welcome Page, shown in the graphic above titled "ACORN Portal Welcome Page."

The DDQ Team and many of Sutter Health's end-users have found ACORN's portal site a helpful and useful tool that supports their work at the health system level. At Sutter Health, ACORN is considered a valuable resource for many service lines in addition to the health information management staff. Users often share ideas and suggestions on how to improve the portal site, and the team is always exploring and learning new applications or uses for the portal site. The portal site technology is still evolving and so is ACORN.

Portal sites represent technology that can offer support for an organization no matter its size. Once the organization decides on what would be the most helpful topics and information for the staff, the groundwork is laid for creating a portal site to help bring that information to all relevant staff. Having an ongoing maintenance plan for the portal site is also important to make sure that the content remains current. In this 21st century workplace, having an important information resource available to employees on a 24/7 basis is an invaluable addition.

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Article citation:

Gibbs, Sally. "Evolution of Coding Information/Resources to an Organization-wide Portal Site" *Journal of AHIMA* 88, no.2 (February 2017): 44-46.

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