

Expanding Role of Care Coordination in HIM

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By Cecilia Backman, MBA, RHIA, CPHQ, FHIMSS; Teresa Brown, RHIA, CCS; Lesley Kadlec, MA, RHIA; Annessa Kirby; Mary Ann Leonard, RHIA, RAC-CT; Maria Ward, MEd, RHIT, CCS; Kathy Westhafer, RHIA, CHPS; and Lee Wise, MS, RHIA, CHCO

Health Information Management's (HIM) role in care coordination involves much more than ensuring records are collected and disseminated for reporting purposes. HIM ensures that patient needs are met through availability of patient information along the continuum of care.

HIM is frequently called upon to support many coordination of care measures. That can include measures developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), the Joint Commission, and the National Quality Forum (NQF).

With strong coordination of care processes in place, providers have accurate information available to support quality care. This is especially important for patients transitioning between care settings, with multiple health issues, or who are being seen by multiple providers.

And yet, a lack of clarity often exists around the definition of care coordination. AHRQ presents this definition to help identify critical activities involved in care coordination: "the deliberate synchronization of activities and information to improve health outcomes by ensuring that care recipients' and families' needs and preferences for healthcare and community services are met over time." This definition clearly highlights the importance of coordinating information that is readily identified as a key role for HIM professionals.

Care coordination ultimately leads to improved quality and better outcomes. HIM plays a key role in this by ensuring that the right information is provided at the right time wherever it's needed.

The Importance of Care Coordination

Rapid changes are happening within healthcare. HIM must be present when organizations make or change care coordination decisions. Efficiently providing high-quality, patient-centered care should be the goal of any healthcare community. HIM focuses on keeping accurate documentation of what transpired during a patient encounter and in assuring the availability of the information to other care providers.

Obviously, the role that HIM can play in the care coordination arena is broad given the wide range of skills that HIM professionals possess. Many options are available to utilize HIM's expertise. Failure to involve HIM in the care coordination process is similar to golfing without a club. Just as it is very difficult for a golfer to attain the desired result of getting the ball in the hole without the club, a provider cannot provide effective, meaningful care without comprehensive patient health information in hand.

Detailing HIM's Care Coordination Role

HIM's role in care coordination is to ensure that current, complete, and accurate information is available in a timely manner so appropriate care can be rendered. HIM is the gatekeeper of the patient's health information in an electronic, paper, or hybrid format, and therefore plays a number of roles in care coordination, such as managing release of information to patients and aftercare providers, managing patient portals, ensuring outside records are managed appropriately when received, etc. These functions are especially important during transitions of care as the receiving healthcare team may not be familiar with the needs of the patient. In some cases, information transferred with the patient may provide the only insight into the patient's condition and care needs.

HIM professionals also assist by establishing specific criteria and data elements to be available during transitions of care—through the development of tools specific to the care setting, such as cancer centers, dialysis units, long-term care providers, and by ensuring that appropriate and complete information is available. Absence of data may be detrimental to the patient's outcome, or at the very least, extend the time and labor needed to meet patient needs.

Through periodic information audits, HIM assists in ensuring the accuracy and completeness of information. Concurrent and post discharge record reviews of patients requiring extended time in a facility helps identify information practices that are inconsistent with facility and care standards.

HIM should have established systems to ensure that material is completed in a timely fashion. Automated tools, such as alerts, may be utilized to assist in the review process. Providers utilize their expertise to review the information and determine whether further action is needed. Inconsistencies would be tabulated as part of the quality assurance process and examined to determine if systemic corrections are needed.

HIM's Involvement is Critical for Care Transitions

In today's fast paced environment, information on patients is typically needed prior to and/or at the time of discharge to facilitate appropriate care placement. It is vital that HIM works in conjunction with case management or discharge planning to ensure appropriate information is available by discharge.

It is also HIM's responsibility to ensure information is entered into the patient's record (whether paper, electronic, or hybrid) and available in a way that provides easy access for providers involved in the patient's care. In hybrid records, items can be overlooked if the provider is not trained to review both paper and electronic records during a patient's visit. This could become a larger concern as more parts of the record become electronic.

It is imperative that HIM be actively involved when information systems are designed. This includes information that is going to be shared with a health information exchange (HIE), the patient, other providers, as well as information requested for audits and involvement in a quality improvement organization (QIO). In an environment where multiple systems are being used to populate the EHR, HIM must understand how and from where information is being captured and where it will reside within the EHR. Without HIM involvement, processes could fail to meet the needs of the patient, the organization, and regulatory and accreditation requirements.

HIM is generally the only member of the healthcare team who sees and works with the clinical record as a whole and is concerned with the final product in terms of content, accessibility, and its ability to function as a business record.

Shifting Healthcare Structure Driving Care Coordination

As healthcare moves from a fee-for-service environment to management of a healthcare population within a geographic region, care coordination is integral to success. Population health necessitates that the care delivered to a patient be coordinated by all providers of care. This requires sharing patient data among all care providers.

There is a growing need for interoperability across integrated delivery networks to ensure seamless care delivery. To date, there has been little incentive to share information electronically because of the way providers are reimbursed. As healthcare moves into an environment that is risk-based from a quality, cost, and reimbursement perspective, the business case for investments in technology that facilitates electronic exchange, as well as sophisticated data analytics, will become self-evident.

Healthcare providers need to consider investments in technologies to stay ahead of the curve as it relates to payment reform. These technologies complement existing EHR systems and allow population health to take root.

HIM professionals can hone their skills by:

- Increasing their understanding of technology and the EHR systems in use
- Exerting a leadership role in information governance
- Assuring the quality and integrity of ICD data and other coding and classification systems such as LOINC, SNOMED, and nursing diagnoses systems

- Staying abreast of emerging technologies, rules, standards, and practices

An example with regard to the latter bullet, the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) recently issued a report recommending the creation of a health information infrastructure and the development of a universal exchange language for data sharing. In addition, organizations operating within an accountable care organization are developing registries and using care coordinators to monitor patients within the registry in an effort to maintain control of their chronic illness. Rules-based alerts trigger the care coordinator to follow up with the patient as needed. In addition, the care coordinator serves as a health coach for the patient when the patient has questions related to their illness.

HIM has an essential role in care coordination. By assuring the quality and integrity of documentation along with the encoded data that results from that documentation, and by assuring the safe and secure transmission of patient information to all providers of care, HIM contributes to the health and well-being of the individual patient as well as the larger healthcare population.

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Cecilia Backman (Cecilia.Backman@optum360.com) is an HIM operations consultant at Optum360. Teresa Brown (tbrown@kdmc.org) is the HIM director at King's Daughter Medical Center. Lesley Kadlec (lesley.kadlec@ahima.org) is a director of HIM practice excellence at AHIMA. Annessa Kirby (annessa.kirby@ahima.org) is the practice council manager at AHIMA. Mary Ann Leonard (malhip@yahoo.com) is the supervisor consultant/principal at Health Information Professionals. Maria Ward (maria.ward@ahima.org) is a director of HIM practice excellence at AHIMA. Kathy Westhafer (kwesthafer@christianacare.org) is a manager, data management and analytics at Christiana Healthcare Services. Lee Wise (leewise2008@hotmail.com) is the health information manager at Summit Medical Center.

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