

Family Trade: Multigenerational HIM Professionals Make the Industry a Tradition

Save to myBoK

By Daniel Land, RHIA, CCS

Health information management (HIM) professionals by nature are intensely focused on the present and future—especially today with health IT leading a large scale evolution in the HIM industry. The demands of daily life often leave little time for reflection or nostalgia. However, this perspective is likely different for those who see HIM as a family business. For them, the past helps inform and drive their present and future.

This article showcases the stories of four HIM families and delves into their emotional and intellectual connection to the profession. In a time of rapid change in healthcare, this article takes a moment to celebrate the long reaching influence of HIM professional elders and reflect how these mentors and educators inspired a new generation of HIM careers.

Three Generations of Women Share Passion for HIM

By Julie A. Dooling, MSHI, RHIA, CHDA, FAHIMA, vice president of national sales at Just Associates

My mother, Ruth Pursley, attended Draughon's Business College in Springfield, MO and began her HIM career in the late 1940s at O'Reilly Army Hospital in Springfield, MO as a medical transcriptionist. I remember her stories about shaving wax off the phonograph cylinders that were used to record dictation. This was certainly early medical transcription technology. Mom specialized in radiology transcription. She worked as a medical transcriptionist for almost 60 years before she retired in 2007 from Cox Health in Springfield, finally "giving up the keyboard" when she was 80 years old.

Mother helped me get my first job at age 16 as an "X-ray orderly." At this point, I knew I wanted to do something in the medical field, although uncertain which discipline. My first job in medical records was auditing the Master Patient Index in 1980 (via Lektriever) and soon thereafter, I found transcription.

I worked as a medical secretary/medical transcriptionist for several years until 1993 when my mother and I embarked on an opportunity of a lifetime. Together we owned and operated a regional medical transcription service. It was an amazing experience and one that I will always hold close to my heart. My daughter, Malia, was two years old at the time. She was used to sitting on the floor, playing with her toys, while Mom and "Nana" were either transcribing or talking to our contractors or physician clients on the phone.

A couple of years later, we sold the transcription service when I was recruited by a large physician clinic system as transcription manager. In 2006 I decided to finish my associate's degree and attain the RHIT credential. In the last 10 years I have continued to serve in job roles that supported my professional growth. I had placed my formal education on the back burner until five years ago. Within the past five years, I completed my bachelor's degree and attained the RHIA and CHDA credentials, as well as finished a master's of science in health informatics.

Mother passed away last year. She never met a stranger, just new friends; she loved meeting new people and looked forward to new conversations. She shared her HIM passion with anyone who would listen and helped many people find jobs in healthcare with her network of friends and acquaintances. I find myself following in her footsteps; drawing inspiration from her passion and expertise every day.

I'm Malia Tingler, the former two-year-old playing with toys on the floor of my mother Julie Dooling and grandmother Ruth Pursley's transcription company—and now a current health information administration student.

The first medical term I learned was “streptococcal pharyngitis.” My mother and grandmother would teach medical terms to me that I found fascinating and I continued to learn by watching my grandmother work in her home as a transcriptionist. I was required to take a career opportunities class during my freshman year of high school and thought I wanted to be a nurse. I wrote a research paper on pediatric nursing and shadowed one of my favorite nurses from my pediatrician’s office. When I graduated from high school in 2010 I began working for a local home health agency and also filled in once a month in the HIM department of a local hospital. I soon realized that HIM was what I wanted to do. I loved coming to work and did not hesitate to work extra hours. Solving puzzles, finding solutions, and making sure the records were complete and accurate is what I wanted to live for!

My mother encouraged me to pursue a bachelor’s degree in health information administration, and I transferred my college credits to the College of St. Scholastica where I am currently studying. I also work for a large cardiology group and my mantra is to learn something new every day, just like my grandmother taught me.

As a third-generation HIM professional, I am proud of both my mother and my grandmother. They have always encouraged me and others to be the best they can be. Their dedication to their work emphasizes the quote, “Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life.” One day I hope to be as encouraging to others and share my love for this profession.

A Family Affair

By Kelly McLendon, RHIA, CHPS, managing director at CompliancePro Solutions

Many readers of this story will remember *Family Affair*, a popular television show from the late 1960s. I thought it the perfect title for a quick tale about how our family has grown with the HIM profession, a tradition that continues to influence others to pursue successful careers in a unique niche of healthcare that has grown so much over the years.

In the 1960s my cousin, Marjorie Ann Gabriel, RN, and her parents were best friends with Charlotte Johnston, RRA (RHIA). Charlotte was the director of the medical records administration program at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, GA. We all lived in central Florida, so our family interactions occurred frequently. Charlotte was an early evangelist about the medical records administration (MRA) profession (dating us, aren’t I?) and we were aware of the profession throughout childhood and when preparing for college.

Charlotte told us about the duties managed by medical records professionals and how we could have careers in healthcare without actually performing patient care. My sister, Lauren McLendon Burnette, RHIA, decided to go to college for MRA while she was still in high school, wisely choosing to attend Western Carolina University in the mountains of North Carolina. I attended the University of Florida for two years and thought about attending medical school, but was not enthusiastic about it. Lauren’s positive experience at Western Carolina University reinforced Charlotte Johnston’s message, so I transferred to Florida Technical University (now the University of Central Florida) in Orlando, FL and started in their MRA program. As synchronicity would have it, one of my teachers was the great Jeanne Tucker, MA, RHIA, who you will hear about in another story.

My sister and I would compare notes as we progressed through our education, and then when we began working in the profession. My sister worked in Georgia and I worked in Florida. She and I both served in traditional roles as HIM directors but I quickly migrated into a sales position for a healthcare microfilm company that converted older paper records to microfilm. I would visit medical record programs in colleges and talk about “non-traditional roles for medical record professionals.” It was unusual in those days to not work in a hospital’s medical record department and I wanted the students to understand that they could broaden their horizons beyond the hospital setting, which has turned out to be today’s reality.

A younger cousin, Tracy Gabriel Peabody, earned a bachelor’s degree in another major but always knew that HIM was an option. After working for several years in management in an unrelated field, Tracy’s interest in computerization led her to the health information administration program at the Medical College of Georgia. Why not? Her cousins were both successful members of the profession. She earned the RHIA credential and began her career as an HIM director. She eventually joined the same electronic health record (EHR) company that I worked for and evolved her career into deep data analytics and information management. Her husband, Chip, followed in our footsteps by working in sales for physician practice EHRs and administration.

My son Ryan is currently working as an HCC coding specialist while in college studying information technology. His long-term goal is to run his own company, which he has seen can be accomplished within our field. It seems that the HIM profession has influenced yet another member of the family who has been immersed in the language of HIM from birth.

It has been amazing to watch the profession expand and evolve over 40 years. Although much has changed, other challenges remain constant. It has always been an uphill climb for our profession to receive the respect it deserves. I am thankful to be involved in a profession that is open to a wide community that is interconnected by not only common professional practices but also by family members and friends. What could be better? We can honestly say that it is a family affair.

Mother to Daughter to Son—An HIM Family Continues

By Barbara J. Flynn, RHIA, CCS, vice president of health information management services at the Florida Hospital Association

My mother, Jeanne H. Tucker, MA, RHIA, began her HIM career in 1956 at West Orange Memorial Hospital in Winter Garden, FL, where she was a member of a small medical records staff. Within a few months, Jeanne became manager of the department and attained her Registered Record Librarian (RRL) certificate from the American Association of Medical Record Librarians (now AHIMA). She had previously earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Northwestern University in 1942.

In the early 1960s, Jeanne was director of medical records at Sunland Training Center in Orlando, FL. During this time, she served as a delegate and officer in the Florida Medical Record Association (now FHIMA). She was active on the national level as well, serving as a delegate to the American Medical Record Association. She became director of medical records at Orange Memorial Hospital in 1965, one of the largest hospitals in the state at the time. Jeanne was instrumental in promoting the new medical record administration baccalaureate degree program at Florida Technological University (now University of Central Florida) and was a member of the first graduating class. She later served as an adjunct professor and interim director of the program.

Throughout her tenure at Orange Memorial Hospital, Jeanne mentored many HIM students from the University of Central Florida (UCF) including Linda Kuyper, PhD, RHIA, Esq. and Laura Clark, RHIA, who were both directors of the health information administration program at UCF.

In 1972, Jeanne went to work for Care Communications as an HIM consultant. While with Care Communications, Jeanne was a presenter for AHIMA's "Strategies for Success." Her presentations were always witty and fun. Jeanne was the director of quality assurance at Winter Park Memorial Hospital from 1979 until 1982 when she went to work for Whittaker International and spent two years working in Saudi Arabia as the director of quality assurance for Whittaker-managed hospitals in Jeddah and Riyadh.

Upon returning from Saudi Arabia in 1984, Jeanne rejoined Care Communications as their southeast manager and provided consulting services, conducted educational sessions in coding and HIM management, and managed several large consulting projects including coding for a large class-action lawsuit. Jeanne served as president of the Florida Medical Record Association in 1964 and served as president of the American Medical Record Association from 1976 to 1977.

My personal HIM career began as a summer job at the age of 15 as a file clerk in medical records at Orange Memorial Hospital. By the time I was 17 I was performing assembly and analysis of medical records as a weekend job.

I majored in clinical lab technology at Valencia Junior College and continued to work part-time in medical records at Orange Memorial Hospital. By this time, I had begun to code using ICD-8-CM and had decent typing skills. Orange Memorial Hospital had an on-the-job training program to train medical transcriptionists, one of the highest-paid positions in HIM at the time. I applied for the training position and was accepted.

I was involved in an accident which forced withdrawal from my studies at Valencia in 1970, and I decided to work full-time as a medical transcriptionist, a job that I held for 12 years. With encouragement from my mother, Jeanne Tucker, I completed AMRA's correspondence course and became an ART (RHIT) in 1977, then a certified medical transcriptionist in 1982.

I served as program manager for the medical records program at Seminole Community College (SCC) from 1982 to 1990 and developed and taught three vocational programs: medical transcription, hospital ward clerk, and medical assisting. I was the president of the Florida Association for Medical Transcription in 1984. While serving as program manager at SCC, I continued to work part-time as a medical transcriptionist for Winter Park Memorial Hospital and as a coding consultant for Care Communications.

On a long drive back from south Florida to Orlando, I had a discussion with my mother on the best route to take to further my education. I was still working in academia and higher education degrees were necessary in order to progress. At this time, I had 20 years' experience in HIM. My mother encouraged me to pursue a BS in health information administration through Stephens College in Columbia, MO. I attained the RHIA credential in 1991.

My tenure with the Florida Hospital Association (FHA) began in 1991 as director of medical records education. My responsibilities included developing educational materials and presenting educational sessions on topics related to the HIM industry, including ICD-9-CM and CPT coding, DRGs, coding compliance, and serving as an advocate for HIM issues at the state level with the Agency for Health Care Administration.

Prior experience with Care Communications as a traveling coding consultant led me to found the contract coding service as a part of the FHA to provide backlog and interim coding services to member hospitals with certified coding professionals living in the state of Florida, thereby lowering the cost of these services.

By 1995, our organization was providing contract services to 20-plus hospitals in the state. In many of the hospitals, the backlog in coding was partially due to backlogs in other areas, such as assembly and analysis. To meet this need, FHA began providing contract assembly and analysis staff. Five team members were employed to provide assembly and analysis services, one of whom was my son, Heath Flynn.

I served as president of the Florida Health Information Management Association from 2004 to 2005, 40 years after my mother's tenure in the same role. My mother's influence on my career was great but subtle. She was my first HIM employer in the late 1960s. My mother was truly a cheerleader and leader in the HIM profession. Her excitement about her chosen career was always present until her death in 2013. I attended many of my mother's presentations over the years as I continued to craft my public speaking skills. My mother was a hard act to follow in many, many ways. Her greatest influence on my career was her work ethic, humor, dedication to mentoring new HIM professionals, and her perseverance.

I'm Heath S. Flynn, CCS, CPC, the eldest son of Barbara Flynn and grandson of Jeanne H. Tucker. With both parents working and with limited child care resources, my brother and I sometimes found ourselves going to work with my mother and sitting quietly in the back of the classroom at Seminole Community College as my mother taught anatomy and physiology to her students. Sitting through the occasional lecture, along with access to college anatomy models, I knew where all the organs were located in the body and what their function was by the time I was 10 years old. I never showed more than a curious interest in HIM until, at age 20, I found myself married with a child of my own and working three jobs to support my family. When my mother offered me a chance to put some of my other skills to use and only have to work one job, I could hardly refuse.

I was hired by Florida Hospital Association Management Corporation (FHAMC) as HIM clerical support staff part-time in 1995 to provide medical record assembly services to hospitals in southeast Florida. I continued in the profession by also learning to do deficiency analysis. During the occasional lull in assembly and analysis work, I would attend coding seminars taught by my mom or help my grandmother with her coding projects. I continued to be assigned on assembly and analysis contracts through 2012, at which time most all of the hospital clients had converted to a fully electronic health record.

The more I studied HIM, the more I suspected it was responsible for my interesting family dynamic. At family get-togethers all were welcome to their opinion but any statements made were subject to inquisition. You would not state something as fact without having many logical reasons at your disposal for why you believed it to be true. This probably all stemmed from the goal of "coding integrity" and being able to justify each code. It is hard to imagine a more headstrong group of people.

My mother and grandmother encouraged me to further my HIM education and skills by becoming a certified coding professional. I went back to school at Daytona State College to take the necessary ICD-9 and CPT coding classes. Upon

completion of the classes, I took the examination to become a CPC. With the CPC credential, I started in a mentoring program with FHAMC and a local hospital to gain experience to sit for the CCS exam. I became a Certified Coding Specialist in 2015.

A Tale of Two Cousins

By Daniel Land, RHIA, CCS

My mother's first cousin, Joan Funderburk, RHIA, began her career in 1954 as a medical transcriptionist in the radiology department at the Southwest Florida Tuberculosis Hospital in Tampa, FL. Several months—and several thousand chest X-rays later—she applied for a secretarial job in the “records department.” By the end of the year, she had been promoted to assistant librarian, and she did not yet have a credential. The American Association of Medical Record Librarians (AAMRL), the ancestor of AHIMA, did not yet offer their Accredited Record Technician (ART; now RHIT) correspondence course. There were no universities at the time that offered a baccalaureate degree in Medical Record Administration within driving distance of Tampa. So Joan became active in the Florida Medical Record Association and took full advantage of their educational offerings. Her mentors included pioneers of the HIM profession. Joan's belief that one should commit themselves to a rigorous discipline of self-education began early in her career.

She was offered the position of chief medical records librarian at Tampa General Hospital in 1963, contingent upon completion of AAMRL's one-year ART correspondence course. She received the credential from AAMRL (#862) in 1964. During a very busy time in her life, Joan decided to pursue a baccalaureate degree in medical records administration at the University of Central Florida. This required a two hundred mile drive twice weekly. She persevered and received the Registered Record Administrator credential from AMRA (#7,067). Joan served as president of the Florida Health Information Management Association in 1981. She moved to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1984 and was the director of HIM at King Fahd Hospital until she returned to Florida in 1992.

Joan served as a mentor to many people in the HIM profession, always encouraging them to pursue higher education and give back to the profession through volunteerism. Colleagues remember her integrity, determination, intelligence, and sense of fairness. She always wore a white lab coat and kept candy in the pockets to appease snarly physicians. During one of our last conversations, she reflected on her life and remarked, “The profession and I grew together. It gave direction to my life, provided interesting and challenging work, allowed me to live abroad and travel the world. I absolutely loved it.” Joan died in 2016 at the age of 86.

Growing up, my knowledge of HIM as a profession was peripheral at best. I knew that Joan worked in healthcare and did something with medical records. I never considered healthcare as a career choice until life (and Joan) intervened. I was busily pursuing a BFA in interior design at the Savannah College of Art and Design. A family emergency required that I take a hiatus from college and return home. It soon became apparent that I would be unable to return to Savannah to complete my BFA and I began searching for an alternate career path. I was fortunate to come from an exceptionally close and interconnected family, one that scanned the horizon for opportunities to help one another.

Joan took an interest in her young cousin and suggested that I investigate a local community college's new ART program, as she thought I might be well-suited for the profession. Her great enthusiasm for the profession is what prompted me to consider HIM as a viable option, although it was worlds away from my original career path. I soon discovered an interesting and multi-faceted profession that values intellect, integrity, and accuracy. Joan's advice was simple: “Do your very best every day and do not settle for mediocrity. Our profession rewards excellence.” I earned the ART credential and CCS certification in 1998 and then several years later followed in Joan's footsteps at the University of Central Florida and earned the RHIA credential.

I knew that coding was my niche after it really “clicked” for the first time. In the words of Jeanne Tucker, a past president of AHIMA, “Coding is an art and a science.” Indeed, it is. I enjoy the fact that coding is ever-evolving, challenging, and offers endless learning opportunities. My career began 21 years ago as an emergency department coding professional and has morphed over time to include coding compliance, reimbursement, documentation integrity, education, content development, and management. I am fortunate to have had exceptional mentors who took time to offer insight, guidance, and friendship. Volunteerism has always been an important component of my professional life, serving in various capacities on local, state, and

national levels. I currently have the honor to serve as first year co-chair of AHIMA's Clinical Terminology and Classification Practice Council.

Joan's work ethic, curiosity, and problem-solving skills set the standard for me to follow. By nature, she was not someone who endlessly promoted herself but allowed her work to speak for itself. As a member of a multigenerational HIM family, I feel a keen sense of responsibility to help ensure a strong future for our profession by thinking creatively and strategically and to serve as a mentor for the next generation.

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