Gauging Coding's Evolution

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The influx of information technology in the healthcare industry has led many to wonder what the future holds for coding and what coders must do to remain vibrant and knowledgeable.

Back in 2000, the coding futures task force asked the same questions. In the *Journal* article "A Crystal Ball for Coding" the members described future scenarios that would change the coding function.

The scenarios revolved around rapid technology change, data management standards, cost-driven healthcare, and a shift to patient-centered care as demand for information and quality increased. These scenarios and their respective drivers create a new vision for the future of coding in the not-so-distant future.

Adapting to Change

The task force suggested that the coding profession "define itself in an open-ended way to take full advantage of opportunities in the electronic world." To thrive, coding professionals must embrace transitions such as those to data management and principles beyond ICD and CPT.

The task force's future state also includes a shift to nosology and application of terminology and classification expertise to mapping and further understanding how they interact to optimize data.

One recommendation that arose from the task force's analysis was the evolution and creation of the right suite of credentials to meet these scenarios. The new Certified Health Data Analyst credential demonstrates the evolution of the coding role to one of data analysis.

Future Coding Roles and Education

In 2003 Jill Giddens, RHIA, CCS, discussed future coding roles in her presentation "The Evolving Role of the Coder—Current to Future State" at AHIMA's Annual Convention. Giddens outlined several options for future coding roles, including quality review coordinators, clinical data specialists, and information system coordinators.

Anticipating how the HIM profession will evolve has also required that we ensure our academic and educational infrastructure continues to prepare students for the future. In 2007 AHIMA released Vision 2016, a blueprint for HIM education that includes the emerging technical expertise professionals require.

For coding in particular, Vision 2016 recommends that associate programs become more specialized to adapt to work force needs. As coding becomes more automated the coding role becomes more and more focused on the outputs, looking at quality of coded data and interpreting that data for improvement in patient care and public health analysis.

A higher level academic foundation will be critical to ensure that coding professionals are prepared for this future and can advance in their careers.

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