

HIM Can Play a Role in Price Transparency

Save to myBoK

While a lot has been done to fight some of the biggest inequities in healthcare—such as higher premiums or insurance denials for pre-existing conditions—some mysteries of the system remain impenetrable for consumers. Chief among those is price transparency and the quagmire that must be navigated when patients receive stunningly high emergency department (ED) bills.

Vox.com just wrapped up a year-long investigation into ED bills and has built an extensive nationwide database of reader-submitted bills and records to study regional price variations and irregularities.¹ Vox's investigation has resulted in hospital bills being successfully appealed and disputed and inspired bipartisan legislation to address this issue.²

The articles confronted opaque charges on ED bills such as “facility fees”—the charge assessed just by walking in the door and sitting in the waiting room—as well as “trauma activation” fees. Vox also confronted inconsistencies in ED coding and the variation of reimbursement from Medicare versus commercial payers.

When this investigation kicked off, experts from Vox and former Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Chief Data Officer Niall Brennan were not optimistic about prices or price transparency improving in 2018. A year later, except for the proposed legislation, the predictions were accurate.

However, one thing is clear. Vox ultimately noted that some patients who have successfully appealed their bills did so because they had an “in.”

“Some especially savvy patients have even had luck arguing that their facility fee charge was coded incorrectly—that the hospital used a billing code that should be reserved for really intense, complex visits when their visit was actually pretty simple. I’ve noticed that these patients tend to have a doctor in their family who can help them make this type of argument,” Vox reporter Sarah Kliff wrote.

Obviously, not every patient is lucky enough to have a health information management (HIM) professional or physician in the family. But HIM professionals are in a position to become part of the solution in their workplace and at home. They can advocate for more consistent and transparent coding practices and collaborate with in-house patient advocates to promote more user-friendly patient claims. Above all, HIM professionals understand that it shouldn’t require having a doctor in the family to successfully navigate a hospital bill.

Notes

1. Kliff, Sarah. “Hospitals keep ER fees secret. We’re uncovering them.” Vox. February 27, 2018. www.vox.com/2018/2/27/16936638/er-bills-emergency-room-hospital-fees-health-care-costs.
2. Kliff, Sarah. “The bipartisan plan to end surprise ER bills, explained.” Vox. September 21, 2018. www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/21/17887692/voxcare-surprise-er-bills-senate.

Article citation:

AHIMA. “HIM Can Play a Role in Price Transparency.” *Journal of AHIMA* 90, no. 2 (February 2019): 60.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.