

HIM Director on Cutting Edge of Electronic Records

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by Jewelle Hicks, newsletter editor

As the director of medical records at RML Specialty Hospital in Hinsdale, IL, Donna Hofer, RHIA, is essentially responsible for all the functions of an HIM department. Coding, transcription, release of information, and compliance auditing all fall under Hofer's jurisdiction. But her organization's most recent and prestigious assignment has been implementing a computerized physician order entry (CPOE) system.

CPOE systems are designed to help doctors manage patient treatment information such as referrals, prescriptions, and tests in an effort to increase accuracy. RML Specialty Hospital is on the cutting edge—only 5 percent of hospitals nationwide have implemented a CPOE system. This was a huge undertaking that involved the entire hospital and is a source of pride for this 80bed long-term acute care hospital in northeast Illinois.

Starting Off on the Right Foot

The transition from paper to electronic records was not easy. Starting in 1998, Hofer and her information services team began rolling out their electronic health record system one department at a time, beginning with admitting and ending with patient care services, until they reached the current CPOE stage last May.

When queried about the key to a successful CPOE rollout, Hofer emphasizes that support from all parties involved is crucial. The technology support from the information technology department, a shared vision from the board of directors, a good relationship with the software vendor, and physicians who champion the project are all vital to success. "Without their support and commitment, the project would have failed," she says.

The next stage in the process was staff training and education. "We sent key players for training and utilized 'super users' during the implementation process," Hofer says. "These super users were spread throughout all shifts and our IS staff was always available during the implementation process." Although there was some hesitation toward such a large change, Hofer notes that having the IS staff on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, greatly decreased the level of resistance.

Overcoming Obstacles and Moving Ahead

Hofer points out that when implementing new technology there will always be a certain level of aversion to change. For example, two years ago when the hospital implemented electronic signatures for physicians and met resistance, her response was to focus on the positive. "I emphasized the advantages of the new system—the ability for physicians to review reports and labs in the EMR as well as the remote access features—in order to gain support," Hofer says.

The result of all these changes at RML Specialty Hospital has been overwhelmingly positive. There has been a decrease in delinquent records, daily cumulative summary lab reports are computerized instead of printed, and a policy was developed to outline what constitutes a legal medical record.

Hofer sees the role of the HIM director evolving into "a true health information manager as organizations move to a paperless environment. Instead of being just the keeper of the paper record, we'll need to manage health information in an electronic format."

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