

HIM Role in the PHR: Patient-centered Care through Patient-centered Information

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by Ellen B. Jacobs, MEd, RHIA

What is the role of the HIM professional in the personal health record (PHR)? With expertise in managing health data and protecting patient privacy, HIM professionals have an important role in creating patient-centered care by helping put consumers in control of their health information.

Enabling Access, Offering Education

The world of PHRs seems to evolve almost daily as new players and new technologies enter the market. Each addition seems to raise new questions about the content of the record, its sponsors, control, and format. The market has not yet identified a preferred mode for a PHR.

Regardless of model, a PHR should place the consumer at the center of care, providing them with access to their health information and the means to better manage it. Through the PHR, patients gain some control over their healthcare. The patient as the source of control is known as patient-centered care.

For consumers to be active members of their own healthcare team, they need information about their health and healthcare. As advocates of access to personal health information, HIM professionals promote patient-centered care.

Advocates for Patient Access

HIM professionals have a key role to play as a voice for the patient. This is not a new role; we have always carried the banner of patient privacy. Advancing patient access and control of personal health information is not a large step from that of privacy advocate.

Advocacy for patient-centered care through information can take place on many fronts in our professional roles. In the provider setting, it can be accomplished through release of information processes or supporting the development of a secure patient portal to electronic health records. New parents can leave the hospital with a personal health record binder for their newborn. A clinic at the University of Nebraska Medical Center provides patients with a wallet-sized CD containing their records in an easily accessible format. HIM professionals can promote PHRs within their organizations and work to provide patients with education on using their personal health information.

In our personal lives, we can encourage our friends and families to begin PHRs by taking simple steps: carrying a list of their current medications, requesting copies of their records, and beginning PHRs for their children by compiling a list of family illnesses. We can suggest they visit www.myPHR.com, a resource on setting up a PHR. We can become a part of the AHIMA Community Education Campaign and bring the message to a wider audience.

Experts on Health Data

A core HIM skill is identifying the needs of data users. Patients are relatively new users of health information. Who is more knowledgeable about the data needed to manage an individual's health and healthcare than an HIM professional?

We know how to find health information and can help consumers get the data they need to start and maintain their PHRs. We can explain the different sources of data and how they are used.

Advisors on Privacy Protection

Sharing patient data must happen while protecting patient confidentiality. As long-time advocates of patient privacy, HIM professionals can provide guidance to consumers on what to look for in PHR privacy policies. We can advise consumers to understand what the sponsor will do with the information in their records, who can access which pieces of the record, and how access will be controlled.

We can encourage them to learn if the sponsor intends to resell the data to other companies and, for PHRs that are employer-sponsored, if the employer will have access to the information in the records. Even in aggregate form, data may reveal who has been treated for sensitive conditions such as depression. Consumers should determine their risk of discrimination based on information they reveal in a PHR whose data can be accessed by an employer or payer.

Most of us selected a healthcare career to help people. In assisting consumers with PHRs, we do that. We make a difference in the lives of patients and raise awareness of the HIM profession. Mary E. Goodell, RHIT, active in the AHIMA Community Education Campaign, says it best: “When a retiree’s face lights up because he just realized how easy-and important-it is to have accurate health records before traveling, that is reward enough for me!”

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Article citation:

Jacobs, Ellen B.. "HIM Role in the PHR: Patient-centered Care through Patient-centered Information" *Journal of AHIMA* 78, no.4 (April 2007): 38.

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