

HIM Service with a Smile

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by Colleen Goethals, MS, RHIA

As HIM professionals we encourage consumers to maintain personal health records. Are we ready to help them do it? Here's a quick refresher on good customer service in the HIM department.

AHIMA's Consumer Education Campaign encourages consumers to create and maintain their own personal health records (PHRs). We tell consumers how to access such information, and we advise them to obtain their relevant information from each of their providers.

To do this, consumers must request copies of their medical records and summaries of their visits. As patients come to our facilities requesting their records, we should review our policies and procedures and make certain they result in good customer service.

Authorization

When a patient requests copies of his or her medical record, HIM staff should explain the entire process up front: the forms that must be completed, copy fees that may apply, personal documents that may be needed (such as photo identification when picking up the records), the need for witness signatures, et cetera. There should be no surprises. Staff should also inform patients of the days and hours when they may pick up their records.

Consumers should understand that they will be required to complete and sign an authorization for release of information (where applicable). This authorization varies from facility to facility and state to state. Regardless, the form should be easy to read and complete. If appropriate, it should be translated into other languages. Staff should fully understand the form and have the ability to explain and assist requesters in completing it.

Some facilities post the form on their Web sites, offering an easy way for patients with online access to obtain it. Once completed, the form can be mailed or faxed to the department.

Copy Fees

If a facility charges to provide copies of health information directly to patients for personal use, it must review all applicable federal and state laws. Federal regulations allow for "reasonable" fees to be charged for medical record requests. Many states have enacted laws that place caps on these fees. Facilities must confirm that their fees are reasonable and not in excess of state law.

Many facilities do not charge patients for personal copies if the number of pages falls below a minimum; others charge the maximum amount allowed by law. Some facilities charge a set fee, such as \$10 regardless of length. Facilities that charge for copies should consider keeping the fee affordable so patients can get information that is rightfully theirs.

HIM departments can also assist patients by giving them the minimum necessary to accomplish the task. Explain to the consumer the parts of the record that are most helpful to them.

Reviewing the Original Record

If a patient requests to view the original record, set a time for review and have a private place accessible so that the patient can view his or her record confidentially. It's a good idea to have a staff member present, not to interpret the record but to

protect it from alteration, damage, or even disappearance. Explain this policy to patients so that they don't think you are intruding on their privacy.

When patients come knocking on our doors asking for assistance in creating their PHRs, let's be sure to help, not hinder. Let's provide good customer service and assist patients in becoming active participants in their own healthcare.

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For information on AHIMA's Consumer Education Campaign, members are encouraged to contact their component state associations.

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