

# HIM's Changing Functions: Multiple Initiatives and Legislation Will Broaden HIM Responsibilities

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ARRA-HITECH has had a major impact on the HIM profession over the last two years. However, the profession has also felt the effects of regulatory changes from Medicare legislation and budget act provisions passed in the last decade.

These changes will have a short- and long-term impact on the current HIM workforce and those graduates just entering the healthcare industry.

## ICD-10 Openings

The transition to ICD-10-CM/PCS provides new challenges and new opportunities for current coding professionals, who will play integral roles in migrating the industry to the new code set. However, ICD-10 also offers opportunities for those coding professionals just entering the field.

As recent coding grads know, many organizations require four or five years' experience for coding positions. While an employer's desire for on-the-job experience is understandable, there are components of the coding process that could use the expertise of recent graduates. For example, under the direction of experienced coding professionals, new coders could handle documentation tasks that occur before coding can be done.

ICD-10 is driving a renewed focus on documentation, because the code set requires new and improved documentation practices to support its use. Organizations should review their documentation processes now and seek opportunities for new coding professionals with ICD-10 knowledge who can help resolve documentation issues.

The new code set is not the only reason documentation has become a hot topic. Documentation quality is a subject of concern in Washington, DC, as policy makers and data analysts realize that documentation processes must be improved in support of value-based purchasing systems.

## Automation in the EHR

Coding will also change as standard electronic health records (EHRs) are developed and installed and coding is automated. Coding professionals will serve as editors and internal auditors, ensuring that automated documentation systems are accurately performing their tasks as they are integrated into the healthcare system.

Recent HIM graduates will likely have EHR experience from online programs at schools and universities where access to such systems has been available. These graduates could become the implementers of health IT alongside more experienced professionals.

## EHR Considerations

Members of the healthcare industry often are not aware of HIM's unique skills in the management and maintenance of the legal health record. There is no other profession that has this training, and these skills are not included in the shorter six-month health IT training programs.

Provider and healthcare leaders must be made aware of HIM's unique role in maintaining the legal health record, which must be incorporated into EHR implementations. Those providers implementing EHRs and seeking meaningful use incentives also will benefit from HIM expertise in the patient access and reporting requirements of meaningful use.

## Reimbursement Changes

Reimbursement changes are coming down the pike, moving providers, health plans, and others to accountable care organizations, value-based purchasing arrangements, and bundled claims processing. These changes will add new responsibilities for the HIM department as data using different protocols and languages from disparate sources must be analyzed. Concerns about data integrity and privacy protections will require HIM expertise.

Making the changes more complicated is the fact that different health plans or payers will have different integration rules that will create a variety of scenarios for data collection and use within these new relationships. HIM managers must plan how these variations will be addressed, and senior management must understand why HIM must be involved.

## Population Health

In addition to changing reimbursement requirements, the HIM profession is also faced with consumers and an industry that are demanding more oversight and use of data to improve population health. AHIMA has advocated for years that administrative and clinical data not be modified to address various external and internal data requirements. HIM's motto has been "collect once, use many times."

However, the call to improve population health means that HIM professionals must be involved in ensuring that data taken from EHR and administrative systems are accurately and appropriately reported for secondary data uses.

So while one might think the elimination of paper records will decrease HIM staff, in reality the nonclerical aspects of HIM will continue to grow as the industry takes better care of its health information and uses it for a variety of functions that will improve both individual and population health while cutting healthcare costs.

## Privacy and Security

Since HIPAA was implemented, HIM professionals have taken on the role of privacy and security officers, and there are significant privacy and security challenges ahead related to HITECH, changing technology, and patient accessibility.

In May the industry received a proposed rule on accounting for disclosures and access. The rule, which would give patients the right to a report of anyone who accessed select information in their records, would require covered entities make changes to their systems at a time when they already are responding to many other government and industry initiatives. Further changes to the accounting of access portion of the rule could be coming in future years.

The Office for Civil Rights, author of the disclosure and access rule, also plans to release a significant privacy rule this fall that will cover most of the other HITECH changes. Some of the provisions will overlap with other system changes and patient access issues.

The meaningful use program and HITECH privacy changes add new requirements related to patient access that HIM must analyze and implement. Most current EHR systems and expanded designated records sets or systems cannot report data in a way that is useful to the patient.

The industry is slowly finalizing various discharge reports and transmissions that will meet individual needs, but translating clinical data into a meaningful language for the average patient is a challenge.

The new disclosure and access rule likely will raise considerable anxiety among consumers who for the first time will see the number of accesses to a record that occur in larger facilities. Consumers concerned with, or confused by, the reports will require explanation and education.

Increasingly, consumer health literacy will become an HIM function, as it is usually the HIM department where this information is sought.

All of these changes require the expertise provided by HIM experience and training. The tasks must be taken on by new and existing HIM professionals and those educators who are preparing the workforce.

HIM professionals have always been stewards of health information. Meeting their obligations to preserve the integrity, privacy, and accessibility of data while adapting to many new regulations and initiatives is a challenge. But it is also an opportunity to demonstrate why the profession is so necessary to our healthcare delivery system.

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