Helping Coders Keep Current

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by Kevin Heubusch, managing editor

On the heels of new medical procedures and new devices come the new codes and new interpretations to describe them. That's why Terry Tropin says that coding's biggest challenge is "keeping up."

Tropin, RHIA, CCS-P, CPC, is manager of coding education at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). Tropin and her staff provide resources that help keep physicians and their coding staff up to date in a quickly changing environment. Ongoing education, she says, has become an integral part of the coding profession.

Help Line

Tropin's department fields questions directly from member physicians and their coders. That's important, Tropin says, because many coders in physicians' offices work solo and lack colleagues with whom to discuss coding challenges.

She doesn't regularly answer the questions that her department fields, but as a former coding specialist, Tropin does enjoy keeping her hand in by answering the occasional question. "Especially the tough ones," she says.

Tropin focuses on producing workshops and publications. She cowrites workshop syllabi and develops workshop and publication content with workshop presenters and her coding committee. She manages approximately half the workshops onsite and presents at other meetings a few times a year.

Good Coding, Good Business

Correct coding can keep a physician practice in business by ensuring proper and timely reimbursement, Tropin says. Without proper reimbursement, a great doctor can go out of business. At worst, she notes, incorrect coding can put a practice on the wrong side of the law.

That's why ongoing education for coding staff is an important investment. Formal training, Tropin notes, "is very different than giving someone books with ICD-9 and CPT codes and asking them to figure it out." New devices and new drugs present some of the biggest challenges, and keeping to authoritative resources is important. "There's a lot of bad advice out there," she says.

Tropin keeps plenty of resources on hand, and she often turns to her advisory committee of 14 physicians who work in various aspects of practice. To help anticipate future questions, she visits vendor booths at conferences, checking out new products and collecting literature.

Making Sense

Tropin started in HIM after deciding she needed a career change. She walked the block to her local community college and looked through the course catalog to see what was "up and coming."

She enrolled in the health information program and began work on an associate degree. She had a family and small child, and she attended classes at night and worked during the day four days a week.

Anxious to get to work in her new career, she started looking for her first HIM job before she even completed her degree. She began as a coding specialist at ACOG with a year still to go in her program.

After several years as a coding specialist, Tropin took her current job in coder education. For Tropin, the best part of the job is "taking something complicated and wrestling it to the ground—making it make sense so that everybody understands it."

When she presents or manages a workshop and when her department answers a tricky coding question, she enjoys the appreciative response they receive. "It's nice to feel you're doing something to help someone out there in an office, which can be very isolating," she says.

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