Holistic Approach to Health Information

Save to myBoK

by Jane Jeffries, associate editor

Yolanda Malone, RHIA, can trace her career path back to an HIM professor's advice. "When I was looking for a job out of school, a professor told me to look at anything related to HIM," says Malone. *Don't limit yourself*, her professor told her. "And that's why I am where I am today."

Malone is the manager of payor relations at the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) in Chicago, IL. Her job consists of answering coding and reimbursement questions from physician members, working on coding policies and proposals, giving seminars at state meetings, and coordinating the activities of the AOA's Coding and Reimbursement Advisory Panel.

"The more I speak about what we do, the more calls I receive," Malone says. "I follow the whole reimbursement process—every facet. I'm a resource for this type of information to our members."

A Hands-on Approach

Osteopathic medicine takes a "whole person" approach to healing, and doctors of osteopathic medicine (DOs) view the body as an integrated system in which illness in one part of the body will affect other parts. DOs also practice preventive healthcare and use osteopathic manipulation treatment (OMT) as a hands-on adjunct to surgery or medication. DOs use OMT to manipulate the spine, soft tissue, muscles, and bodily fluids. The association offers the Healthcare Facilities Accreditation Program as an alternative to or in conjunction with Joint Commission accreditation.

The AOA represents 44,000 physicians and the profession is growing steadily, according to Malone. "We've experienced a growth spurt over the last few years compared to recent growth in the number of MDs," she says. "A larger number of DOs are being trained than ever before."

Which means an ever-increasing demand for Malone's services. "A lot of people don't know about osteopathic medicine or OMT. Problems arise with medical reviewers because they aren't familiar with it," she says.

The Challenge of Change

Malone began her HIM career in a hospital, where she worked for seven years. With her former professor's advice in mind, Malone moved to the department of coding and nomenclature at the AMA, where she developed codes with different physician specialty groups. Having been at the AOA for a year and half, Malone understands the complexities physicians encounter.

"Physicians are in a reimbursement arena that's constantly changing. Older physicians are used to fee-for-service care, but with Medicare and managed care, there are lots of changes for them to learn," she says. "They get frustrated. It's challenging to encourage the physicians not to give up—and tell them that change is always going to be here and we have to make the best of it."

Malone also wants to make the best of changes in the HIM field. "We have to try to maintain the integrity and security of health information. Everyone wants to have the computerized medical record, but you can really erode the integrity of the information, depending on who has access to what and when," Malone says. "We can make these changes. However, we need to maintain certain standards. How can we have national patient identifiers and maintain security? This is [HIM professionals'] role," she says. "I feel very passionate about this, and I will consider these issues when assisting in the development of the AOA's response to the recently proposed privacy standards."

Malone considers herself on the "business end" of healthcare, but knows her work ultimately improves patient care. "By working on the policy end of medicine and knowing health information, I can influence some of the policies," she says. "I'm one of those people who was just lucky enough to fall into a job I love. I enjoy coming to work and working with these people. I enjoy the challenges."

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