

In the Winds of Change, Principles Provide a Steady Course

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by Merida L. Johns, PhD, RHIA

HIM professionals have weathered dramatic structural, environmental, and technological winds of change due to several reasons, but the profession's fundamental principles, remain unchanged even as they apply to each new method of practice.

*Our passions are the winds
that propel our vessel.
Our reason is the pilot that steers her.
Without winds the vessel would
not move and without a pilot
she would be lost
-traditional proverb*

For the past 80 years, efforts to improve health information quality, use, and delivery have propelled the HIM profession. In fact, the profession's birth was a direct consequence of the "winds of change" set in motion by the American College of Surgeons hospital standardization movement in 1918.

Understanding the critical relationship between quality documentation and delivery of quality care, the hospital standardization program incorporated criteria for medical record documentation and maintenance. Ten years after the inception of the hospital standardization movement, a nucleus of 35 medical record clerks assembled for a meeting in 1928. The purpose of this meeting of the "Club of Record Clerks" was to have a roundtable discussion on medical records at the American College of Surgeons' hospital standardization conference in Boston. At the close of this meeting, an organization named the Association of Record Librarians of North America was formed.

Establishing HIM Principles

From its earliest inception the association recognized that a profession required preliminary training that was intellectual in character, involving knowledge and learning as distinguished from mere skill. Thus work began immediately on the formation of a prescribed course of study for medical record librarians. A curriculum was formally adopted in 1932.

In 1933 the association recognized that the existence of unqualified workers in the field lowered the standards of the profession. Hence in that year it organized a certifying board known as the Board of Registration, "so that there might be a yard-stick by which qualified medical records librarians could be determined."¹

A review of the association's professional journal throughout the decades shows the HIM profession's steady commitment to education as a primary mission. In fact, such a commitment was reflected in the association's very first constitution and bylaws, developed in 1929 and subsequently reaffirmed in a revised 1952 constitution. These stated the association's goals to be:

- Improve the quality and efficiency of medical records in hospitals, clinics, and other health and medical institutions
- Establish the standards and criteria of competency and promote the education of medical record librarians
- Improve and develop the teaching and practice of medical record library science so that it may be of greater service to the science of medicine and public health
- Perform any and all other acts required or indicated for the attainment of these objects²

Setting a Steady Course

From the beginning, the profession has never wavered in its commitment to health information quality and efficiency. Dedicated to maintaining competence, credentialed professionals have embraced a code of ethical principles, completed a prescribed educational curriculum, and fulfilled criteria for certification. These underpinnings, or the profession's "reason," have served it well, steadying its course through the changing winds of time.

Each era over the past eight decades has brought its own set of challenges. In the early days, identifying the foundations of the field of "medical record science" confronted the profession. The profession's founders considered it their "prerogative and responsibility to establish rules and regulations for the training of medical record librarians."³

The curricular foundations they established focused on developing the entire person for professional work, emphasizing the importance of studies in the liberal arts, biological sciences, medical terminology, clinical classification systems, "medical record library science," ethical principles, hospital statistics, communication skills, and the "intellectual character" of the professional work.

The founders did their job well. An AHIMA work force study completed in 2004 validates that these curricular foundations are as legitimate today as they were 60 years ago. Education programs, the study concludes, should continue to educate professionals in a broad curriculum while maintaining an emphasis on clinical components and developing analytical and strategic thinkers.⁴

Staying the Course

Era after era has had its own passion, characterized by methodological, technological, structural, and other advances affecting HIM work. It is unlikely that any area of HIM has not been affected over the years. For example, in the 1930s the method and technology for transcription were shorthand and typewriter. In later eras, dictation belts, tapes, and magnetic cards emerged as the new technologies. Today voice recognition systems and automated transcription systems are the new passion. Sixty years ago, coders used SNDO to assign codes and manually transcribe these on large index cards to prepare and store physician and disease indexes. Today's passion is for advances in automated coding.

HIM professionals are a flexible and adaptable breed. From card files and cardveyors to digital systems for storing the master patient index, from alphabetical and numeric filing systems to electronic health records, the HIM profession has embraced and used new passions to move forward without losing its identity.

How has the profession remained robust and maintained its course in the face of continuing change? Likely, there are many reasons, but the most compelling is the value the profession has placed on the pilot that steers it.

The pilot is a union of two essentials that make up the profession's mission: focus of purpose and development and maintenance of a professional community. The fundamental concepts that support the profession's focus on health information quality and efficiency are unchangeable, even through dramatic change.

Likewise, the three constructs that form the basis for the professional community allow the profession to make good decisions, staying the course and ensuring survival during times of change. Embracing an enduring code of ethics, professionals are steady and guided in decision making regardless of the environment. Educated in a broad curriculum with prescribed subsets that prepare individuals for the "intellectual character" of professional work, the community of professionals is easily able to embrace new methods and technology that furthers its focus on health information quality and efficiency in concert with its values.

Finally, the professional community attaches importance to a certification process that validates professional and educational preparation, serving as a yardstick in determining competence. This benchmark ensures that the community of professionals has the capability to appreciate, incorporate, and use new methods and technologies in adding value to professional work, while at the same time not sacrificing fundamentals of professional practice.

For these reasons, the HIM profession can truly say that the winds of change propel it and that reason is the pilot that steers it on a steady course.

Notes

1. Huffman, Edna K. "Requirements and Advantages of Registration for Medical Record Librarians." *Bulletin of the American Association of Medical Record Librarians*, March 1941.
2. McGuire, Helen B. "The 1952 AAMRL Constitution, By-Laws, and Registration." *Journal of the American Association of Medical Record Librarians*, August 1953.
3. Sister Mary of Jesus. "Today and Tomorrow-for the Student of Medical Record Library Science." *Bulletin of the American Association of Medical Record Librarians*, December 1940.
4. AHIMA. "Data for Decisions: The HIM Workforce and Workplace." 2004. Available online at www.ahima.org.

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