

Information Governance: Why Should I Care?

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Information governance (IG) is a term you will hear frequently as we move into 2015. AHIMA announced its release of the Information Governance Principles for Healthcare (referred to as “Principles” in this article) at AHIMA’s Annual Convention and Exhibit in October 2014. The Principles are intended to be a “group of fundamental norms, values, and rules used to comprehensively govern an organization’s information strategy, whatever that may be, from cradle to grave.”^[1]

Should you, as an individual health information management (HIM) professional, care about IG? The answer is a resounding “absolutely.” The Principles put HIM—and you—in the spotlight. And it’s possible that your personal future success, along with the effectiveness of IG, may well depend on your acceptance and promotion of IG.

What IG is Intended to Accomplish

Let’s simply define IG along the lines of the above: The IG effort is intended to be a comprehensive governing tool for an organization’s information. In other words, the “operational” end of IG is the creation, management, and appropriate destruction of information. This description should sound familiar to HIM professionals, as these are areas in which HIM professionals have excelled for years.

We know that many other healthcare professions have never fully understood or valued HIM as highly as other areas because those professions did not understand the competencies or complexities inherent in HIM. During the months and years ahead, IG could change all that. The HIM professional can become the educator and an important member of the IG leadership team. For the purposes of individual HIM career advancement, this could be the moment you have been waiting for when others “get it”—what you bring to the table and how important the work of HIM is of vital importance to the goals and business needs of any organization.

The articles and information you will start to see more frequently that highlight the value and terminology of IG and the Principles will outline the role you can play in providing experienced leadership in this newly defined and developing arena.

The Role of the HIM Professional in IG

Where do you, the HIM professional, fit into IG? Depending on your level of seniority or job title, you may be called upon to develop the management tools for your organization. You may also be asked to implement the tools or to monitor implementation of a comprehensive program or to lead the overall team responsible for IG.

You already possess many of the skills others will want to learn. You can provide the vital voice of experience in a discipline that others are just beginning to understand. Even if you are not in a position to lead efforts, HIM professionals within an organization will be expected to continue to manage health information in a manner consistent with the IG process that is developed. In short, the professional must, for one reason or another, become familiar with the process that has been developed and be able to work with information consistent with that process. This should not be difficult as you already possess skills in information “governance” (although your skills were not previously defined as IG).

From the clerk who matches patient identification correctly to those engaged in clinical documentation improvement efforts, the coding team, and all those involved in any quality data efforts, HIM professionals are already performing IG—sometimes without even realizing it. HIM professionals need to understand and support the IG principles, rules, and processes as healthcare delivery models and organizations continue to evolve.

Beyond the Basics

Some may view IG with an attitude such as, “it’s here and I have to live with it.” However, there is another approach, one that emphasizes your professional training, experience, and knowledge and that should maximize your worth and value to your organization.

The advent of IG as a governing concept presents HIM professionals with a unique opportunity. If everything seems too daunting, consider the following in the context of the Principles:

- Not surprisingly, “records” are a central focus of the Principles. Documentation of whatever IG process an organization chooses to implement and integrity of the documentation that the organization creates and maintains for its purposes is critical to the overall business of the organization. This is what HIM has been doing in healthcare since 1928. You are a natural “fit” into IG.
- The *Principles* reflect and, indeed, encourage IG to be dynamic within an organization. In other words, an organization’s management process should be created and implemented in such a way as to respond to the organization’s current *and* future needs. No matter what the role of the individual HIM professional in the process, all members of the HIM “team” should be encouraged to observe the implementation and operation of the process and to recommend appropriate changes when needed.
- The HIM professional’s job is not simply to apply the process to a particular document but, instead, to recognize when the workflow process does maintain the integrity of patient or patient-related data and how to resolve any conflict in processing within the organization’s IG structure. In effect, every HIM professional becomes a monitor and a peer reviewer of the effectiveness of the process.

What’s in it for Me?

The authors of this article are of the opinion that every HIM professional has a vested interest in the success of the Principles as presented by AHIMA.

Since 1928, members of AHIMA have been responsible for the “records” detailing the business of healthcare—the patient care records. The advent of IG provides a unique opportunity to reinforce the value of HIM professionals as the responsible custodians of these essential records—making certain that the records are accurate, securely maintained, available when needed, and destroyed in accordance with an organization’s legal and business needs.

HIM professionals have a unique set of skills and experience to aid their organizations in the development of robust IG programs that maintain and enhance the integrity of healthcare business processes. This is your time and your opportunity to step to the forefront of this new initiative. The Information Governance Principles for Healthcare are entirely consistent with, and complementary to, AHIMA’s Code of Ethics and provides HIM professionals with a new arena in which to shine.

Note

[1]. Empel, Sofia. “The Way Forward: AHIMA Develops Information Governance Principles to Lead Healthcare Toward Better Data Management.” *Journal of AHIMA* 85, no.10 (October 2014): 30-32.

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