

Information "Healthcare's Most Important Resource": an Interview with Incoming AHIMA CEO Alan Dowling

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By Chris Dimick

Since beginning his career in healthcare, Alan Dowling, PhD, has understood that health information management is at the core of quality care. It is as beneficial in the treatment of patients as a good radiologist or CAT scan machine, he believes.

As AHIMA's new CEO, Dowling says he is excited to help promote this way of thinking to all corners of healthcare. His goals for AHIMA are concise: to further elevate the profession's status in healthcare and help members excel in their positions.

"I consider information the most significant resource in the healthcare industry, period," he says. "And that is the resource that we have always taken for granted in healthcare. I really think that without the right information, [a provider's] expertise is not going to guarantee quality."

Dowling comes to the association at an exciting time in HIM history. Major HIM issues are at the forefront of the national healthcare discussion-the ICD-10 conversion, new privacy and security regulations, and the federal government's push to promote the adoption and use of electronic health records. Dowling says he is ready to get to work and support members as they take to this new spotlight.

A Passion for Learning and Teaching

Dowling's professional calling is health information technology, the management of health information resources, and informatics. Over his 35 years in the industry, he has consulted, taught, and spoken on the effective use of technology and health records in improving patient care.

Most recently Dowling served as president of Global Health Associates, providing executive and board consultation on information systems and technology adoption. He has served on nonprofit and government healthcare groups, including a work group under the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology that defined health information terms.

He received a doctorate degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for completion of both the Health Care Management and Management Information Systems programs. Teaching is another passion. Since 1981 Dowling has taught healthcare information systems management courses at Case Western University.

As a child, the second oldest of five kids, he grew up on Shelter Island, New York, located just off eastern Long Island. "I was the only kid who had an excuse for missing class because the ferry couldn't get through the ice," he says.

The proximity to water gave Dowling a deep love for boating and eventually scuba diving, hobbies he continues today.

Informatics and Active Duty

His father was an oral surgeon, but initially Dowling planned to avoid healthcare as a profession. He studied physics at first, earning a bachelor's degree in the field from the College of the Holy Cross in 1969.

Dowling's interest in health information came not from school but the service. For more than 20 years Dowling served as a health services officer in the US Air Force Reserve.

An ROTC student at Holy Cross, Dowling joined the Air Force and served in a combat crew in Southeast Asia before returning stateside to earn his master's degree. While studying engineering at Northeastern University, he stumbled across an engaging professor who was starting a new health systems engineering program. The topic intrigued Dowling, and he took

every class he could in health systems in addition to completing the engineering degree, which was required through his military service.

During a conversation with his professor, Dowling realized that healthcare provided the flexibility he was looking for in a profession. "My professor said, you really ought to consider the healthcare industry, because you can do anything you want in the healthcare industry," he says. "If you want to stay in the Air Force, you can be a medical service corps officer, he told me. If you want to be a lawyer, you can be a health lawyer; if you want to deliver care, you can do that."

It was while on active duty that Dowling got his first experience with health informatics. He was assigned to help construct the Air Force's first health information systems, and in doing so received direct education on health data systems, privacy issues, billing applications, and other HIM issues.

"At a very young age I had an incredible opportunity and incredible responsibility," he says. "The Air Force is wonderful in that way. I was able to get into this on the ground floor."

Shared Values

While his experience differs from some members, Dowling feels his ideology is exactly in synch. "Although I come from a slightly different background, we have the same values," he says.

HIM works to ensure that information is captured correctly, safeguarded correctly, and converted to knowledge correctly—issues that are also at the center of informatics, Dowling says.

A personal goal as CEO will be to elevate the recognition and importance of AHIMA members in the healthcare industry, Dowling says. HIM contributions to the adoption of evolving health information systems, skills in EHR implementation, and expertise in the evolving code structure are vital to quality healthcare, and they should be recognized.

The association also should continue its strong advocacy of the proper management and use of health information resources for the benefit of society, he says.

Dowling's vision is to have AHIMA recognized across healthcare as the definitive organization with holistic expertise and values in all areas of health information. While his vision may be complex, Dowling's specific agenda as the new CEO is simple.

"The first agenda is to support our members' success in their profession," he says, "and the second is to do so by being responsive to the elected board's direction of where the association needs to go."

Dowling's first order of business is to work with the board on strategic planning for the organization's future. "The vision is not a radically different one. It is all the things the organization has valued in the past," he says, "but taking it forward into the future, which is changing very fast and very dramatically, and is affecting the scope, career potential, and livelihood of our members."

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