

Keeping Her Wits During HIPAA Hysteria

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by Anne Zender, MA, editor

Donna Bowers, JD, RHIA, knows that implementing HIPAA is an imposing assignment. But she's keeping her cool.

"Everyone needs to calm down about HIPAA," says Bowers, who is vice president of Baylor University Medical Center and responsible for HIPAA implementation systemwide. "There's a lot of emotion surrounding it, and it doesn't have to be that way. It's not as bad as you think."

Keep It Simple

Bowers, who was promoted to her position in January, says that Baylor's goal is to have one corporate office for the system where employees can get answers to their HIPAA questions. "We've kept it simple and kept costs down," she says. "We'll be compliant with relative ease and without spending a lot of money."

Keeping it simple is part of the goal for Bowers, who believes that healthcare organizations will realize many benefits from HIPAA implementation. "The transactions and code set rules, for example, will standardize a lot of things for hospitals. HIPAA will prevent payers from using separate standards unique to them that a hospital would have to maintain."

Patients will benefit, too—a perk that shouldn't be overlooked, she says, pointing out that many of the requirements related to privacy and security are functions HIM professionals are already familiar with. "Our patients want to feel secure about their information—that it won't be disclosed inappropriately. A lot of what the regulations require, we already do," she says.

'Growing Up' at Baylor

Bowers' background has prepared her for her new role in several ways. She's spent a large part of her working life at Baylor, going back to the day she was first offered a part-time job there as a high school student. She worked her way through college in the medical record department, then later left Dallas for a stint working in Denver. Bowers returned to Baylor in 1992 to become associate director and, a few years later, director of the HIM department. "Having 'grown up' in the ranks gives me a unique perspective that many administrators don't have," she says. "It helps me on the job."

In recent years, Bowers also attended law school, finishing her JD in 1994. She says getting the degree was a professional turning point for her. "It was the best thing I've ever done," she says. "It's opened many doors for me—the promotion is a perfect example. [The degree] set me on the right course for this position."

In her new role, Bowers has a lot on her plate—from the HIPAA implementation project to HIM-related endeavors such as an initiative to electronically store patient records and an ongoing study of APC-related reimbursement. She also is learning about areas she is responsible for but has little experience in, such as volunteer services, gift shops, and guest relations. "Getting to know areas I've never had to be familiar with—although I've always known they were there—is a big challenge," she says.

In addition, she's keeping up with all of the changing information in the HIM world. She emphasizes the importance of participating in professional organizations and sets an example herself—she'll become president of the Texas Health Information Management Association in June.

It's a tall order, but Bowers believes that staying up to date on the issues—particularly technology—is a necessity for HIM. "In the future, HIM will be highly automated," Bowers advises her colleagues. "Keeping up on technology and understanding it will be critical for those who want to be successful."

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