

Laying the Foundation for the NHII

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by Meg Featheringham, assistant editor/advertising manager

The news is spreading across the country about the need for a national healthcare information infrastructure (NHII). HIM professionals are crucial to getting the word out and moving this initiative forward. Gail Graham, RHIA, is at the forefront of the charge to implement an NHII. As director of health data and informatics at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in Washington, DC, she is laying the foundation for this initiative in a variety of ways.

National Involvement (and Beyond)

Graham began her career as a coder in hospitals in Lincoln, NE, serving as a patient service representative. Learning of the shortage of HIM professionals from a VA report, she headed to the College of St. Mary's in Omaha, NE, to receive her RHIA credential while continuing her work in coding.

After graduating, Graham worked as a staff RHIA and director of HIM at the Amarillo and Kansas City VA Medical Centers. These experiences led to her current position at VA headquarters. "Transitioning from the private sector to the public sector has proved to be a positive move, allowing me to be involved nationally and internationally in health informatics," Graham says. In this capacity she handles and influences issues in the development of an infrastructure to enable an NHII.

Promoting Infrastructure Standards

As director of health data and informatics for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Graham manages the Affairs Health Information Management, Privacy, Data Quality, Data Standardization, and National Data Systems programs; represents the VA on national, international, public, and private committees, boards, and work groups; helps the VA set policy on health record issues; oversees VHA's data standardization initiative; and assists in the development of software requirements for EHR systems.

Graham was instrumental in implementing an EHR system for the Veterans Health Administration, bringing together the records of hundreds of medical centers, outpatient clinics, and nursing homes. The Computerized Patient Record System provides integrated access to these care settings and offers patient information to providers at the point of care.

One of the integral parts of her job is developing and promoting health standards for EHR systems. Graham, who also serves on the AHIMA Board of Directors, is involved in the Markle Foundation's Connecting for Health initiative and serves as a member of the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics subcommittee on standards and security. "We are laying the foundation for NHII through adoption and implementation of health standards," she says.

The Rewards of Collaboration

Graham enjoys collaborating with an array of people in the healthcare sector, from clinicians to health information management professionals, "to build an infrastructure that facilitates the safe delivery of healthcare while protecting the privacy of the individual." It is one of the things she finds most rewarding about her job.

Collaboration and networking with her colleagues and peers help keep Graham current on the latest trends in the HIM industry. "The great thing about this profession is that people are open to sharing their expertise," Graham says. If you run into a problem or question implementing EHR systems or developing HIM standards, she explains, people in the field are more than willing to share their experiences and solutions.

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Driving the Power of Knowledge

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