

Legal Roles Give New Perspectives

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by Anne Zender, MA, director of communications

“I could have retired by now, but I don't regret having any of these experiences.”

—Richard Jeske, RHIT, HIM supervisor,
Alaska Native Medical Center, Anchorage, AK

HIM supervisor Richard Jeske, RHIT, hasn't spent his entire career working in health information management. But he's never really left HIM work behind, either.

“My understanding of health records is that they are always with us in our day-to-day work,” says Jeske, whose background includes stints as a paralegal and an appellate court clerk. His law-related jobs, he says, have given him a rich background to draw on in his current role.

Jeske is supervisor of review, analysis, and coding in the health records department of the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) in Anchorage, a 168-bed facility managed and operated by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, a nonprofit health organization owned by Alaska Native tribal governments.

A Law Odyssey

A native of Michigan, he came to Alaska in the early 1970s when he was stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base. That's also where he began his HIM career.

His interest in legal work came to the fore in the late 1980s when, he says, he began to feel “burned out” at his job. “I felt that I was not making an impact,” he says. Jeske decided to pursue his interest in law and went back to school, eventually becoming a paralegal. Soon after, he joined with six other paralegals and an attorney to form a low-cost legal service practice specializing in family law.

In time, Jeske took a job as a clerk in the state appellate courts. While he enjoyed aspects of the job, he gradually realized that he preferred healthcare to law. He decided to return to his first career and took the HIM position at ANMC two years ago.

In retrospect, Jeske says, his various roles have always brought him into contact with health information. In the family law practice, medical records were used to support cases or prepare for court. And in the courts, he says, “we needed to obtain health records, go through them, dissect them, gather information, and put it all together.”

Today, Jeske's varied experiences have given him a new outlook at work. “If someone asks me a question, I can give an answer from several perspectives,” he says. He puts that experience to work at ANMC, working on projects such as HIPAA implementation and educating colleagues to help them understand HIM fundamentals such as “the importance of getting correct information from the very beginning,” he says.

An Alaskan Success Story

Jeske says he enjoys living in Alaska. “People have always given me an opportunity here,” he says. Opportunities for lifestyle change have appeared as well—Jeske spent five years as a homesteader living in a small community 280 miles north of Anchorage. Even then, he helped his neighbors understand the healthcare system and health record-related issues.

Living so far away from the rest of the country presents some challenges for Jeske and his HIM colleagues. Isolation is one of the biggest. There are limited numbers of healthcare organizations to use as resources, and continuing education can be costly,

he says. In addition, “it’s hard to find skilled and credentialed professionals,” he says. “There’s so much misunderstanding about what it is [like] to live in Alaska.”

For Jeske, the benefits outweigh the challenges. He relishes the state’s cultural diversity and its abundant natural beauty. “Last week, I had three moose in my back yard,” he reports. And at work, he’s enjoyed broadening his scope and joining more committees and task forces over the last two years. At last, he feels, he’s making a difference. “My background has helped me have a sense of contributing to many areas of the hospital,” he says.

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