

# Long Term Care Meets Information Challenges

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by Anne Zender

As the Net surfers of today become the long term care consumers of tomorrow, the long term care industry faces new challenges. Patients and their families are growing increasingly interested in information that will help them make more informed decisions about healthcare. And facilities find themselves receiving an increased number of requests for information—related to general healthcare and to medical records issues. Here's how the industry is preparing to meet these needs.

## Smart Shopping

According to the American Health Care Association (AHCA), nearly half of all Americans will need long term healthcare at some point in their lives. As the "baby boom" generation approaches retirement, the number of seniors requiring long term care is expected to double. Choosing a facility is a critical step, and many industry organizations are offering tools to help consumers in this process.

"As an industry, we are getting a lot of attention; we want to get the message across that consumers need to be fully educated," says Karen Wayne, president and CEO of the Assisted Living Federation of America (ALFA). While assisted living centers are often described more as community-based housing than as nursing homes, consumers are well advised to educate themselves before choosing a facility, Wayne says. "It's such a diverse industry that it does require some study on the part of the resident." To help consumers, ALFA provides free brochures and checklists to aid in the selection process.

The American Health Care Association—the nation's largest federation of licensed nursing homes and allied long term care facilities—offers similar resources for patients and families. In May, AHCA launched a toll-free information line to help consumers make informed long term healthcare decisions. Consumers who call (800) 555-9414 can request several free brochures, including "How to Pay for Nursing Home Care," "Myths and Realities of Living in a Nursing Home," "What Consumers Need to Know about Private Long Term Care Insurance," and information and checklists on assisted living and long term care facilities.

## In Search of Medical Records

As HIM professional roles evolve, increased consumer demand for information will work to the advantage of those employed in long term care as well. Vision 2006 describes the patient information coordinator role as one in which HIM professionals will help consumers manage their personal health information, including personal health history management, release of information, and other functions. While much of the long term care industry focus has been on information requested from consumers, there is also a demand for information once a patient is actually in the healthcare system.

In contrast to some other healthcare settings, requests for information don't generally come from patients, but from families and other responsible parties. As healthcare consumers grow more accustomed to taking an active role in their own healthcare and having more sources of information to choose from, they will likely maintain these attitudes as they make decisions for other members of their families and, eventually, themselves. Jane Burster, ART, a consultant in Tacoma, WA, expects that as the population of long term care facilities continues to change, these facilities will see an increase in requests for health-related information from patients. "Currently, a lot of patients don't care about their records, or they think they can't have access to them," she says. "As our population changes, that may change."

Darline Foltz, RRA, a healthcare consultant in Amelia, OH, has seen an increase in release of information requests in long term care. "Long term care is getting a much different patient now. It's more an atmosphere of rehabilitation," she says. "There is more of a need for residents to have their records to ensure continuity of care. It is making an impact on all staff, including HIM professionals." Compliance issues are also resulting in more requests for medical records from external sources as well, she says.

As a result, Foltz says, employment prospects for HIM professionals are brightening. "Facilities are now putting more HIM credentialed people in positions related to release of information," she says. "Coding and computer skills are important, as well as their knowledge of release of information processes. There is a greater need for skilled people."

—A.Z.

## References

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American Health Care Association  
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Assisted Living Federation of America  
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The Long Term Care Page, <http://www.hrfn.net/~ltcare/ltc.htm> [link not current 4/03]

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