

# Making a Difference, One Member at a Time

Save to myBoK

*by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA*

This month AHIMA will hold its Capitol Hill Day, when HIM professionals from around the country visit the offices of their representatives in the US Senate and House of Representatives. While there are many ways in which HIM professionals can influence Congress, a face-to-face meeting is the clearest sign of support members can give to AHIMA's advocacy agenda. It's also the best opportunity to dialogue with staff and make connections for future conversations.

This year brings a new Congress, which we need to educate about HIM and healthcare industry issues. The industry has held many discussions on EHRs, including policy and technical issues; however, actual conversion from paper to EHRs and a nationwide health information network (NHIN) has progressed slowly.

With the nation at war and the House under new pay-as-you-go constraints, the barriers to adoption and implementation of a standard EHR and the establishment of an NHIN will not be resolved with legislation, nor can we expect huge amounts of funding.

Our role this year must be to educate policy makers about the needs of the HIM profession and what it will take to achieve our goals under the constraints of time, money, education, and work force. This article covers some of the known issues that are on our agenda this year.

## Work Force-Front and Center

Work force is a key issue for the profession and the industry this year. AHIMA is continuing its efforts to advance healthcare informatics and information management in a variety of ways with our advocacy partner the American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA). We expect to see legislation moving forward to support education through research, as well as funds for program development, scholarships, loans, and student recruitment.

Both associations are also working with the Department of Health and Human Services' assistant secretary for planning and evaluation to determine the needs for the professionals who will plan, adopt, implement, and manage EHRs and health information exchange (HIE) on a local and national basis.

Work force efforts are federal and state endeavors since many education programs rely on funding from both in order to keep producing professionals ready for the 21st-century health information environment. AHIMA and AMIA are also working on a variety of projects, such as AHIMA's Virtual Lab, that supplement education programs and help ready professionals and organizations. Investment in education is needed to achieve the national goals in the next decade and beyond.

## Consistency of Health Data and Coding

We will also continue to advocate for consistent health data and coding. Movement to secure pay-for-performance initiatives has heightened the need to ensure data quality and integrity, as well as to improve data use for reporting and monitoring.

In November an AMIA-AHIMA task force released a white paper titled "Healthcare Terminologies and Classifications: An Action Agenda for the United States." This paper is at the center of a joint advocacy effort to address the many problems in the US classification and terminology system. HIM professionals recognize that this is a difficult discussion, but one that must take place if the nation is to achieve interoperability in its EHRs, HIEs, and NHIN.

Both associations have accepted the task force's call for the US to create a centralized authority to provide consistency in process and system coordination, along with the availability of robust terminologies, vocabularies, and maps. To achieve such a

centralized authority, AHIMA and AMIA are seeking funding for a second and more advanced look at what it will take to create and sustain such an authority and develop its governance and process model.

The associations are also looking to develop the principles under which terminology and classification developers and maintainers can join under the central authority to achieve the coordination, collaboration, transparency, and openness needed. The associations also call for the federal government and the industry to determine under such a central authority how the US will be involved with the emerging SNOMED standards development organization and other international bodies that affect terminologies and classifications. These goals will take time.

Congress and the Bush Administration, however, have numerous goals for pay-for-performance, quality enhancement, and patient safety that they feel cannot wait for such infrastructure improvement. This dilemma will continue to affect healthcare entities striving for data quality. As we discuss the data that will be required, its integrity, and its completeness, we also have to address the fact that our industry is very much paper dependent. Developing requirements for an e-HIM® environment will not result in better data quality if we ignore what it takes to collect, analyze, and submit requested data. We will be calling upon you to participate in this discussion this year.

## Ensuring Confidentiality

This year promises much discussion and debate on confidentiality. Currently, the American Health Information Community has two work groups focused on privacy-related issues. This month, RTI International will release a report to the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology on the status of privacy laws in the states.

Meanwhile, as various models of personal health records (PHRs) are being launched, questions are being raised regarding the privacy protections afforded in PHRs held by insurers, employers, and third parties. Most rules and regulations concerning privacy were developed in an era that did not imagine PHRs. Coupled with the demand for new reviews of healthcare information access, use, and disclosure applicable to EHRs, efforts are under way by groups demanding that privacy requirements be strengthened.

In the first few weeks of the 110th Congress, we have seen bills introduced on genetic nondiscrimination and other efforts that affect privacy in PHRs. Such efforts fly in the face of those seeking more access to health information as “permitted by HIPAA TPO rules” for reimbursement activities. Still others believe that nondiscrimination on the basis of healthcare information is the only reasonable way to strengthen confidentiality practices without putting a stop to EHR and HIE efforts and the business of healthcare. Privacy has never been an easy debate, and AHIMA must continue its involvement.

## HIM's Role in HIE

While there are stated goals for the EHR, there are many different perceptions of just what HIE goals look like, how they can be achieved, and when the industry and the country will actually be able to achieve them. Like most issues, HIE is not a stand-alone goal. Various players in the consumer, healthcare, and government arenas have different agendas that must be met as we move toward regional health data sharing. Funding, a clear understanding of what HIE entails, and reimbursement issues remain barriers to achieving a true NHIN.

Our role in the HIE discussion (beyond our actual development roles in the field) is three-fold: first, to explain how various constituencies fit into the HIE puzzle and the benefits of HIE for the industry and consumers; second, to outline the necessary principles for our nation's final HIE product; and third, to map where we currently are to where we need to go. Alone and with other groups, AHIMA will be working with members of Congress and the Bush Administration to seek structure and understanding in the debate surrounding HIE.

### Advocate for HIM at AHIMA's Capitol Hill Day

Building on last year's success, AHIMA will again sponsor Capitol Hill Day on March 21, preceded by a policy briefing on the afternoon of March 20. Our goal is to exceed the attendance of nearly 150 members last year and visit the offices of at least half of Congress. Closer to Hill Day, issue briefs will also be posted on AHIMA's key advocacy issues. For more information on Hill Day, visit [www.ahima.org/dc/hilldayinfo.asp](http://www.ahima.org/dc/hilldayinfo.asp).

For those who cannot attend this year's Hill Day, consider meeting with your congressional representatives or staff in a local town hall meeting. You can also write your representatives and reinforce the message your peers will be delivering on Hill Day. Materials for these purposes will also be posted.

## The Road Ahead

AHIMA and others have called for a road map or strategic plan toward the national HIE goal. With other associations, experts, and you, we hope to give Congress a clear picture of how we can achieve an EHR-HIE goal over time. This is not a one-shot deal. Many conversations, demonstrations, debates, site visits, and letters will have to accumulate and be deliberated to provide an informed legislature and laws, grants, and other actions that will move our very large industry forward across the board.

Over the course of this year and the years to come AHIMA will call on you to help in this education. Each of you works in different places, under different situations, and your voices need to be heard. AHIMA staff looks forward to working with you, whether here in Washington, in your state, or individually. Together we can make a difference.

Dan Rode ([dan.rod@ahima.org](mailto:dan.rod@ahima.org)) is AHIMA's vice president of policy and government relations.

---

**Article citation:**

Rode, Dan. "Making a Difference, One Member at a Time" *Journal of AHIMA* 78, no.3 (March 2007): 18-19.

---

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.