Managing the Furry (or Feathered) Patient Record

Save to myBoK

by Anne Zender, MA, editor

Every day, Margaret Neterer, RHIA, handles documentation for some seemingly unusual patients—cats, dogs, birds, or turtles, for example.

But Neterer, who is manager of the clinical information service at the small animal hospital at Michigan State University's College of Veterinary Medicine in East Lansing, MI, faces the same HIM challenges all too familiar to her counterparts in the world of "human medicine." These include implementing the CPR, coding issues, and HIPAA, to name a few. All of these are key to managing information at the clinic, which specializes in dogs, cats, birds, "exotics," and other small animals (horses, cows, sheep, and other species are treated at the college's large animal hospital).

> "One big difference in working in the veterinary arena is payment. There are no DRGs, APCs, and so on...Most of the payment is out of pocket. There's some insurance, but the clients usually pay us and are reimbursed."
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> *—Margaret Neterer, RHIA,*
> *Manager, small animal clinical information service,*
> *small animal hospital, College of Veterinary Medicine*
> *Michigan State University*

"The Patients Look a Little Different"

Neterer, who has worked at the clinic for 19 years, says that while HIM in the veterinary world is obviously different from HIM in human medicine, there are also some similarities. "Most people can't believe how similar the professions are, although the patients look a little different," she says. For instance, she's currently developing security policies for computerized records. She and her staff are also preparing for an upcoming change to a new coding system. While they previously used the Standard Nomenclature of Veterinary Disease and Operations (SNVDO), they will soon make the switch to the Systemized Nomenclature of Medicine, SNOMED-RT, a reference terminology that includes a veterinary application.

In some cases, Neterer and her colleagues can anticipate how their work will be affected by looking to the human medicine sector. Most recently, she says, she and her colleagues in the American Veterinary Health Information Management Association (AVHIMA) have been grappling with the issue of whether the provisions of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) apply to veterinary settings. "We are investigating this and talking to attorneys and experts for their opinion," she says.

Neterer also faces some of the common problems of the profession, particularly in terms of preserving the integrity of the medical record. "We still have incomplete record problems and clinicians who don't interact with the health record appropriately," she says.

On the other hand, there are some unique perks to working in an environment with animals, she adds. "It's very therapeutic to walk in the halls and be able to pet or cuddle something," Neterer says.

Keeping an Online Presence

While she continues to face new challenges, Neterer's job also has rewards. She enjoys doing retrospective studies, she says —"finding cases to support how to treat a current patient. Right now I have six boxes of records in my office to help a doctor on a study on treating a immune-mediated hemolytic anemia in dogs." Neterer also likes seeing her staff learn and advance. "There are big rewards in helping my staff to take on new skills and move on," she says. "Sometimes they even move into human medicine. When my people can grow and do something good, that's a reward."

Neterer keeps up to date by reviewing her favorite Web sites, including the AVMA/SNOMED site at http://snomed. vetmed.vt.edu. She also checks in at AHIMA's site regularly. "I try to keep tabs on the regulations. Other issues, too, parallel our clinic to the rest of HIM practice," she says. "Some of the material is not appropriate, but I try to find the things that are, like CPR issues."

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