

Measuring Up to IM Standards a Team Effort

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by Cynthia Hilterbrand, MBA, RHIA

Ensuring compliance to the Joint Commission IM standards across a multi-facility system requires more than a handbook-it takes a team effort, communication, and education for all staff. Here's how one system has tackled this task.

For HIM professionals preparing for a Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations survey, the information management (IM) standards are critical. These standards, which ensure that an organization's processes to define, capture, and interpret data are well designed, are not only the responsibility of any single department, however-the entire organization is responsible for them. For this reason, it's important to incorporate other departments into the planning to meet these standards.

How can managing the IM standards become a team effort? The experience of Integris Health System shows us that thorough communication and creative uses of technology are key.

Better Meetings through Technology

The information management (IM) planning team at Integris Health is comprised of 52 members, representing both HIM and IT areas from all aspects of the care continuum, including hospitals, ambulatory care, home care, and behavioral health. These members represent 12 acute care hospitals, one rehabilitation hospital, 40 home care agencies and satellites, two behavioral health hospitals, and more than 90 ambulatory care sites across Oklahoma.

The team meets monthly for two hours via teleconferencing. The meetings are taped for member facilities that cannot meet via teleconference. Agendas are prepared in advance, and minutes are maintained and distributed to members prior to the next meeting.

The meeting schedule is established prior to the beginning of each calendar or fiscal year along with proposed meeting goals or objectives. This enables key members to be present for their input/discussion on their areas of focus or expertise. Because there are 10 primary IM standards, the team devotes at least one meeting per year to each of the 10 standards.

Finding the Gaps

A key part of the planning team's work begins with a yearly gap analysis that compares the current IM standards with the Integris IM plan. The team considers any changes that have occurred over the past year or since the last revision of the IM plan. It also considers new programs, services, systems, and applications that need to be added, as well as those that have been terminated and need to be removed.

The team also reviews the Joint Commission's "intent" statements for each of the 10 main IM standards to ensure that Integris has covered its bases. If the system has not clearly stated its philosophy or strategy, the group brainstorms on ways to demonstrate or display its intent.

In addition to these analyses, each facility or site develops an IM action plan, also called the "e-plan" because it is in electronic form. The e-plan lists each of the 10 standards, and the facility must state whether it is compliant to each standard by answering "yes," "no," or "partial." If the answer is "yes" or "partial," the facility must state how it is compliant, ideally making reference to a policy or process or to results of an audit or to committee, task force, or other minutes.

If the answer is "no" or "partial" the organization must state what action(s) it is undertaking to move toward compliance, as well as a target date. The form must also indicate the person(s) responsible for an action initiative. (Eventually, the team hopes

to add a time-tracking feature to this form to enable it to monitor all outstanding issues or those outside the scope of their target date.)

The e-plan has been a powerful and useful tool because it allows so many users to access each other's information. The input/edit function is protected via a user ID and password, but anyone can see the information. The real benefit is that members can see how others have addressed this standard and stated their compliance status. If there is reference to a policy or process, others can learn from the work of their colleagues instead of reinventing the wheel. What we are seeing is that we are naturally moving toward a more standardized organization by seeing the many ways we have been or are addressing the IM standards.

Another benefit to the e-plan is the ability to do "roll-up" reporting by facility, by continuum type, or by metropolitan area or rural groupings to determine completeness of reviews and compliance levels. It also allows us to see, at a high level, where our major issues are. We can then strategically create task forces to research and implement remedies as needed.

Another helpful tool is a database of questions related to the standards. Currently, this database is separate from the e-plan, but in future the two may be combined. Because the IM standards and sub-standards can change from year to year, it is important to keep this database current. To do this, we have hired IT interns to update our database during the summer. These are usually non-paid internships for which the students can get course credits for their experience.

Each facility/entity is visited annually as part of a site visit by the IM planning team leader. The purpose of the visit is to meet with the members in their environment and review any IM action plan issues, as well as assisting in updating the many IM plan attachments specific to that entity. A site visit schedule is established prior to the beginning of each calendar or fiscal year. Following the site visits, we have also allowed interns to enter the facility's data into the e-plan. The facility or site reviews and approves the entries for accuracy and completeness.

The IM Planning Team also reviews frequently asked questions (FAQs) as published in the Joint Commission quarterly newsletters and industry publications. The team then publishes its responses to the FAQs and provides this information to staff for educational purposes.

Putting the Plan in Action

It's important that all Integris staff have access to the IM plan. To that end, Integris has made its IM plan a 12-page document that serves as a road map to the Integris way of managing information available online via an intranet.

The plan covers the five main sections of scope and direction, information management needs and objectives, information management standards, information for performance improvement, and information management strategies. It also includes more than 75 attachments, including policies, standards, guidelines, statutes, forms, organizational charts, flow process charts, templates, strategic plans, mission/vision/value statements, and numerous spreadsheets. These documents help illustrate examples of compliance with the IM standards.

As the content of the plan changes and evolves, the team can update and replace attachments as needed. This flexibility makes it much easier to maintain the plan without constantly having to revamp the whole thing.

An important section of the IM plan lists the team members and their titles, as well as a short biography of each team member. This section provides a sense of the breadth and depth of the team's magnitude of knowledge and experience.

In the future, the team hopes to enhance staff education further. An item on our task list is to develop a computer-based training module that encompasses the scope of the principles of information management. Staff members will be required to review the module annually, along with other required training units.

Managing Information Organization-wide

Some of the actions taken by the IM planning team over the past year include development of policies and procedures (facsimile, e-mail, remote access, and document disposal), a knowledge-based needs assessment, and some standardized policy and procedure templates.

And, of course, we've continued to learn. The team has identified some areas for improvement, including staff training, improved attachments to the IM plan, and improved IM communications.

We've learned some lessons as well. For instance, we now understand the importance of site or face-to-face visits, which enable us to address the various issues and needs of our member facilities that might otherwise not be apparent. We also understand that it's important to build a level of trust and comfort in the group itself. Each member needs to feel that his or her input is valuable to the process.

Some of our next steps include:

- a review of the new 2001 IM standards and a comparison of new standards and substandards to our current IM plan to determine what if any changes are needed in order to remain compliant
- routine updates to the current IM plan and attachments
- enhancements to the e-action plan

With a system of Integris' complexity, communicating an IM plan across an organization is an ambitious project. With careful attention to communication, a concerted effort to share knowledge, and smart use of technology, the IM planning team has made it happen.

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