

# Meeting HIM Needs Through Advocacy Efforts

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by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA

One of the major benefits of association membership is the opportunity to participate in advocacy efforts on national and local levels. At AHIMA, volunteer leaders, members, and staff work in a variety of ways to promote certain policies and standards within the healthcare industry and the country that uphold our ethics. This article looks at the key issues AHIMA is currently addressing on a national basis.

## A Variety of Contributors

When an association operates on a national level, the formation and selection of key issues depends on a different approach than a small group might use to advocate on a local basis. AHIMA's issue identification and advocacy processes rely a number of vital and strategic contributions to its maintenance of these key issues. These contributions come from:

- Team Talks
- CSAs, specialty groups, and Communities of Practice
- the Coding Policy and Strategy Committee
- the Advocacy and Policy Task Force
- other AHIMA volunteer committees
- AHIMA's professional and technical staffs
- the AHIMA Board of Directors

These groups continually put forward concerns, problems, and solutions that support a dynamic advocacy process that keeps the Association alert to the needs, perspectives, and concerns of the HIM community.

The AHIMA Board of Directors take AHIMA's history and concerns and determine the key issues to which Association volunteers and staff should direct their attention on a long-term basis. Within this long-term approach to these broad key issues, volunteers and staff also labor with individual problems, concerns, and other short-term issues. Currently, the Board of Directors had identified the following seven key issues:

- consistency in coding
- privacy of health information
- HIPAA administrative simplification rules and implementation
- e-health
- advancement of the AHIMA credentials
- medical errors and patient safety
- work force shortage

These are not stand-alone issues. Indeed, they overlap because most of our professional concerns, functions, and problems tend to overlap as well. The issues are fluid and change as the environment that affects HIM changes, but like a budget they serve as a guideline in our advocacy efforts. Let's briefly examine these key issues.

## Consistency in Coding

Consistency in coding has been and will continue to be a long-term goal for AHIMA. According to an AHIMA statement on consistency of healthcare diagnostic and procedural coding released to members of Congress earlier this year, "the collection of accurate, complete coded data is critical to producing useful healthcare information. The integrity of coded data requires that all providers, payers, coders, researchers, government agencies, and other users apply the same coding rules, guidelines, and definitions. It is essential that a single set of coding system rules be applied in order to reduce administrative costs and

improve the quality of the nation's health information, which will ultimately improve decisions about healthcare delivery and the quality of healthcare in the US."

AHIMA staff work on many fronts to advance this goal. For example, staff members represent the Association in a variety of industry standards groups, coding editorial boards, and international groups. Staff and volunteers communicate with healthcare payers, including the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (formerly HCFA) and the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics (NCVHS) to ensure consistent coding procedures and practices. AHIMA's Payers Guide plays a key role in local efforts to ensure the understanding of coding. In recent months, AHIMA has continued its advocacy efforts with the ICD-9-CM Coordination and Maintenance Committee to champion a single procedure coding system and in the initial efforts to see the US adopt ICD-10 as a new national standard.

## **Privacy**

AHIMA has considered privacy as a key issue for many years. Although the recently enacted HIPAA privacy rules may appear to address AHIMA's concerns, the Association continues to call attention to what the HIPAA privacy rules do not do. Preemption and nondiscrimination on the basis of health information are just two of the practices that AHIMA will continue to promote, along with privacy as it is affected by e-health, e-commerce, and the technical advances of the future.

## **HIPAA Administrative Simplification**

AHIMA has been a leader in seeking administrative simplification and privacy for current electronic healthcare transactions as well as for the future, which may include a standard computerized patient record. Today, AHIMA's advocacy efforts include providing input to the Department of Health and Human Services, Congress, and NCVHS, as well as monitoring the problems, issues, and decisions surrounding HIPAA rules and implementation. AHIMA's efforts will continue as future rules are developed under HIPAA and the industry and the government seek the means to implement and modify HIPAA. AHIMA will also continue to address these challenges through education and best practices development and distribution.

## **E-health**

AHIMA began its advocacy efforts in the e-health arena with last summer's very successful consumer e-health conference. This meeting was followed by the development of AHIMA's e-health tenets, which have received considerable industry and government attention. However, these activities are only a beginning as the Association monitors the environment, including the use of the Internet, to ensure that AHIMA positions are represented, understood, and implemented. AHIMA will soon introduce a practice brief defining the medical record as a road map to the electronic health record of the future.

## **Advancement of Credentials**

The Association continues to work within the industry to ensure that the importance of its credentialing programs are understood and that certified HIM professionals earn positions in key areas in healthcare. This effort depends on both local and national efforts to ensure actions are taken that uphold the professionalism that must exist in HIM.

## **Medical Error and Patient Safety**

The Institute of Medicine's recent reports have called on the healthcare industry to address medical errors and their effect on patient safety. While many organizations advocate reporting errors and responding with penalties, AHIMA focuses on ensuring the basic principles and best practices of documentation and information management are understood and put in place. Further, the Association advocates the recognition that investment in the computerized medical record and national standards can help to eliminate error and improve safety. Volunteer committees and staff will be working on a variety of projects to further this cause and AHIMA's role in this important function.

## **Work Force**

This final key issue concerns the current and future shortages of qualified HIM professionals. It is a multifaceted issue that will call for a comprehensive response, including an Association, educational, private, and public partnership to understand and resolve the problems.

These key issues provide an outline of AHIMA's advocacy efforts and many other efforts as well. We will call first on ourselves and then the industry and government to ensure that these crucial issues are addressed. We hope all members will join the Association in these efforts.

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