

Off the Beaten Path

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by Jane E. Blumenthal

Karen Simpson, RRA, health information specialist at Greenstone Healthcare Solutions, Kalamazoo, MI, a disease management company spawned from Pharmacia & Upjohn Inc., stepped right into the pharmaceutical industry upon graduation from college 15 years ago.

At the other end of the spectrum, Kim Lyos, RRA, document information analyst at Parke Davis Pharmaceutical Research, Ann Arbor, MI, entered the pharmaceutical industry a little less than four years ago after working in acute care for a number of years.

Although they traveled down unique career paths, both Simpson and Lyos came to the same conclusion: that their HIM skills transferred seamlessly into a nonacute, nontraditional area of the healthcare industry.

Different Strokes

Over the years, Simpson has put her HIM skills to the test in numerous ways. At Upjohn she used her coding, clinical vocabulary, and patient confidentiality expertise, among other skills. Moving to Greenstone opened up new opportunities for her on the consumer side of the business. As she performs data analysis to support outside clients, her current job description also includes abstracting data and carrying out worldwide medical research. Simpson says the HIM skills she learned in school have transferred well to the pharmaceutical industry. "The concepts are always the same, and I've got to believe that the schools are teaching students more than just the hospital setting these days," she says.

Although Simpson moved directly into the pharmaceutical industry, Lyos is a good example of a professional who made the transition into the field from a more traditional HIM background. Having sought out the pharmaceutical industry nearly four years ago to try "something different," Lyos says that there is ample opportunity in the pharmacy field for HIM professionals. She adds that many of the data analysis skills she acquired through school and work experience come into play in her everyday job functions. She currently oversees the management of scientific records, lab books, off-site storage and archiving, and research databases.

An aspect of working in the pharmaceutical industry that Lyos enjoys is the ability to use her HIM competencies to assist her company in reaching a wide variety of goals. She has played key roles in Parke Davis' efforts to obtain FDA approval of drugs and also has worked on a number of marketing projects. Currently, she is helping her company prepare for the imminent approach of electronic signatures, an issue familiar to most HIM professionals. "It's the same skills looked at from a different perspective than hospitals," says Lyos. She adds that other areas in which HIM skills are important include handling the release of information between a pharmaceutical company's multiple departments and utilization review for clinical trial studies.

Simpson agrees, pointing out that in the interest of maintaining healthy and productive employees, the major pharmaceutical companies have occupational clinics or some other form of intracompany health maintenance program. This attention to employee health leaves many areas in which HIM skills can come into play -- from management of health information for a study's participants to abstracting data for research on long-term health effects of working near loud machinery.

A Gold Mine of Opportunity

Employment opportunities exist in nontraditional health information management roles, but getting started on a different career path can be a challenge. Following is a list of areas and examples of positions offered by pharmaceutical companies that need people with HIM skills.

- Data management -- clinical data specialist, data manager
- Quality assurance -- clinical study auditor, quality assurance analyst
- Regulatory affairs -- regulatory affairs specialist, regulatory operations coordinator
- Clinical research -- clinical research associate, document specialist

- Corporate records -- corporate records manager, document specialist
- Safety/adverse drug reaction reporting -- safety information coordinator, adverse event coding specialist

How to Find Out More

Drug Information Association (DIA) -- (215) 628-2288, <http://www.diahome.org>

Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP) -- (202) 737-8100, <http://www.acrpnet.org/>

Pharmaceutical Online -- Check out the career corner, where you can post your resume, search for open positions in the field, and find out the latest industry events in the online newsletter. Go to <http://www.pharmaceuticalonline.com/>

University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center-College of Pharmacy -- Find links to other sites offering pharmaceutical jobs, pharmacy-related databases, pharmacy listservs, pharmacy-related virtual library sites, and other miscellaneous pharmacy Web sites. Go to <http://www.cpb.uokhsc.edu/pharmacy/>

RPhLink -- This site provides links to Web sites of national and state pharmaceutical associations, links to a pharmacy library, and a link to an online pharmacy newsletter. Go to <http://www.rphlink.com/pharmass.html>

Assistance from Christine M. Collins, MA, RRA, is gratefully acknowledged.

Article citation:

Blumenthal, Jane E. "Off the Beaten Path." *Journal of AHIMA* 69, no.6 (1998): 40.

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