

Out with the Old, In with the New: The Movement to Update ICD-9-CM Gains Ground

Save to myBoK

by Dan Rode, MBA, FHFMA

At AHIMA's 2005 convention, David Brailer, MD, PhD, national coordinator for health information technology, noted that 2005 was a significant year for health IT. The past few months have seen a great deal of progress on a variety of health IT issues and for health information managers who have been championing classification, terminology, and consistency of coding issues.

Legislation to upgrade the 30-year-old ICD-9-CM classification system was introduced in the House of Representatives by Nancy Johnson (R-CT). The Health Information Technology Promotion Act of 2005 (HR 4157) offers healthcare data users the opportunity to ensure that the forthcoming national health information network achieves true interoperability with classification systems and data that mirror 21st-century medicine.

HR 4157 also includes other items to improve the ability of the healthcare industry and the government to move forward in adopting electronic health records and achieving interoperability, including:

- Formalizing the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology
- Providing safe harbors for parts of the Stark and Medicare antikickback rules
- Providing uniform health information laws and regulations including confidentiality and security
- Updating HIPAA transactions standards
- Requiring that the HHS secretary report to Congress on the American Health Information Community and the strategic plan for coordinating implementation of health IT

In the Senate, Norm Coleman (R-MN) introduced companion legislation titled the Critical Access to Health Information Technology Act of 2005 (S 1952), which also calls for upgrading ICD-9-CM. Another portion of this bill covers health IT grant programs.

If Not Now, When?

While the two bills move the adoption of ICD-10-CM and ICD-10-PCS forward, the compliance date for implementation would not be until October 1, 2009. The extended time line allows for the implementation of HIPAA transactions standard upgrades and ICD standards. The Johnson bill also calls for a notice of intent to be issued shortly after the legislation is signed. This notice will give IT vendors official notice that the standards will be adopted and implemented. Vendors have indicated that they need such a declaration to implement the necessary changes in software and databases.

The quest to upgrade ICD-9-CM has been under way since the early 1990s. Over the years different barriers have arisen, including the original passage of HIPAA, Y2K fears, and then HIPAA implementation. In recent years groups have come forward to oppose an ICD-9-CM upgrade, stating that we should wait until EHRs are in place or that we don't need classification systems since we have computer-based vocabularies.

Fortunately, these arguments have not held, and we now have a significant opportunity to improve healthcare data and information, accelerate the adoption of EHRs, and provide improved information for clinical care, reimbursement, public health, and quality measurement. The proposed legislation avoids the current HIPAA barriers and provides a means to upgrade the classification system in a way that will allow users and vendors ample time to make the conversion and achieve implementation.

This opportunity, however, has been here before, and we could lose it if we do not take steps to ensure passage of this legislation.

Quick Action Required

If we are to achieve adoption and implementation of ICD-10-CM, our time to do it is now and it is short. This is an election year, which means that some members of Congress will be on the campaign trail in their states rather than in Washington, DC, dealing with legislation. We must try to achieve final passage before July 4. Otherwise, the legislation will languish and the whole process will have to start from scratch. The timelines would have to be redrawn, which could mean moving an implementation deadline.

AHIMA is calling on all members, our component state associations (CSAs), and our alliance friends to educate the members of Congress and the Bush administration on the need to pass legislation that includes the necessary upgrades to see ICD-10-CM and ICD-10-PCS in place by October 2009.

We have already asked you to send letters via the Advocacy Assistant to your Congressional delegation, both where you reside and where you work. We have also called on members of AHIMA's CSAs to show their support of ICD-10 as they attend their congressman's next town hall meeting, which will occur during winter and spring in their congressional districts.

CSAs have also been urged to sponsor educational sessions for various healthcare providers and health plans to explain the uses of classification systems and why we need to upgrade ICD-9-CM. Members of Congress and healthcare professionals must understand the impact of healthcare data on health delivery, research, public health, reimbursement, and other administrative and policy making activities.

Over the years we have discussed the problems with ICD-9-CM and the benefits of the replacement classification systems ICD-10-CM for diagnoses and ICD-10-PCS for inpatient procedures and healthcare technology. You can find that material on the AHIMA Web site at www.ahima.org/ICD10 and in the FORE Library: HIM Body of Knowledge. AHIMA's Advocacy Assistant provides specific ways you can encourage the support of your member of Congress. Information is also being made available on AHIMA Communities of Practice.

HIM professionals are not alone in these efforts to improve our healthcare data and data reporting systems. A variety of provider, health plan, health technology and health IT vendors, and professional groups are likewise engaged in this activity. However, each of you probably know healthcare professionals and groups that do not understand the need for improvement and upgrading. Frontline HIM professionals are the ones who can explain how the ability to use an updated classification system can improve our healthcare delivery system. Our industry and our patients need you to help in this effort.

AHIMA is placing a variety of materials online to assist in this effort. If you run into a situation or question that cannot be answered with the material you find, AHIMA has also initiated a frequently asked question section on the ICD-10 Web site at www.ahima.org/icd10, which includes instructions on how you can raise questions that are not covered.

Speak up at Hill Day

As in years past, AHIMA will be sponsoring our Annual Capitol Hill Day in Washington, DC. This year's Hill Day is scheduled for March 15. The need to pass ICD-10 legislation will be a cornerstone of our day as we go to the Capitol to visit our congressional representatives. I invite you to join us this year. Details will be announced shortly in the AHIMA e-Alert and on the Web site. To accommodate members and schedule appointments, we urge you to register soon.

Whether attending Capitol Hill Day, writing letters, attending town halls, or inviting members of Congress to visit your organization, I urge you to join other HIM professionals in advocating for this very important health IT legislation. The opportunity is now.

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