Owning the EHR and Information Governance at Your Facility

Save to myBoK

By Erin Head, MBA, RHIA, CHTS-TR

For many decades, health information management (HIM) departments have been the hub for information collected within healthcare organizations. HIM has frequently been referred to as the "medical records department" due to the perceived idea that the department's main tasks are receiving and storing information to file on a shelf or put into storage.

Behind the scenes, HIM has always been at the forefront of impacting documentation compliance with an emphasis on health information integrity through analysis, as well as accurate reimbursement through coding. But HIM can no longer operate behind the scenes in today's healthcare environment.

With paper-based medical records, health information typically flowed from clinical departments, where the information originated, to its home in the HIM department to be completed and coded, and then up through the revenue cycle to be processed for billing and reimbursement. This traditional flow of health information had typically been in a non-cyclical pattern. Most of the health information was gathered and put away under lock and key and stored for years without being easily accessible. This method of storing health information with minimal contact or use is no longer a relevant practice in the rapidly advancing healthcare realm. HIM departments must adapt and develop new skills to appropriately meet the needs of the US healthcare system.

Technology advances and a push for making data accessible "now" compels HIM departments to serve the organizational and population needs in a cyclical pattern which is necessary for impacting the constant challenges and changes in healthcare. These changes must be embraced by HIM professionals in order to remain relevant. Many HIM professionals have found themselves having to reestablish their "turf" when it comes to informatics and traditional HIM functions, in terms of HIM "owning" or "being at the table" for electronic health record (EHR) system implementation/governance, data analysis, and other informatics roles. HIM professionals may be wondering how to successfully transition the old-fashioned "medical record department" functions to align skill sets with the needs of today's data-rich environment.

Invest in HIM Now to Gain Future Roles

The "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program initiatives have led to many projects that aim to improve quality, safety, and efficiency, reduce health disparities, improve patient engagement, improve care coordination, and strengthen the privacy and security of health information. As a result, EHR implementation projects have been popping up across the healthcare spectrum. HIM professionals must be at the table throughout the continuum of EHR implementation including vetting, testing, modifying, improving, and training users on an EHR system.

Organizations are investing in training for clinical staff to garner new technologically advanced skills and pulling clinical staff from direct patient care positions to serve in new roles centered on informatics and EHR governance. HIM leadership and senior organizational leadership must also invest in enhanced training for HIM professionals to develop the appropriate skill sets for improving clinical EHR workflows and using data analytics for healthcare quality improvement. This training could be offered in a variety of settings, including college or university courses, certificate programs, vendor-specific training, or online webinars. Developing HIM professionals' skills is a worthy investment in ensuring HIM involvement, leadership, and ownership of major projects and initiatives.

Move On or Get Left Behind

If a HIM department is still operating with the standards of days gone by, there is an imminent need for change. Creating a reorganization plan and communicating the potential impact of any changes on the horizon to key stakeholders within an

organization will help HIM directors and managers pave the way for new and exciting accomplishments in the HIM department.

Metrics and visual presentations should be used in the reorganization plan to explain how the changes are going to promote efficiency and allow better use of information. Regardless of an organization's reporting structure, a plan will be well received if it is presented in an organized, impactful, and strategic fashion.

New positions within the HIM department may need to be created by identifying any significant job duties and projects that are not currently being accomplished by existing staff. HIM professionals who once worked with paper medical records may have become underutilized as paper processing tasks have dissolved with EHR implementations. Existing job descriptions will need to be revised to include EHR workflows and tasks related to data analysis. These new positions and roles also create great opportunities for new HIM graduates to be welcomed into the field.

The core curricula for CAHIIM-accredited education programs place emphasis on training future HIM professionals in key domains including health data management, information systems, administrative and clinical workflow, and informatics. AHIMA credentials further validate these competencies by having HIM professionals prove their understanding through best practice application and critical thinking assessments. Thus, it is important for HIM departments within organizations to recruit and further develop educated HIM professionals to build on the foundation provided by the education and credentialing. Key stakeholders must be made aware of the diverse competencies that HIM professionals possess. Human resources associates must be educated on recognizing HIM education programs and AHIMA credentials and should align these abilities with appropriate competitive compensation.

Seasoned HIM professionals, including coders, should focus on sharpening their skills by obtaining continuing education in technology, external forces, and performance improvement among the other HIM domains. Doing so will expand the knowledge of existing HIM professionals and allow the HIM department to keep current with the rapidly changing healthcare environment.

Don't Wait to Be Invited

When a new project is being introduced to an organization, it is a great opportunity for HIM professionals to acquire new responsibilities and skills. HIM should step in and take ownership of projects, especially those involving templates and other documentation tools such as speech recognition. Setting up the EHR to capture documentation specificity is important to ensuring the information needed for accurate coding and reimbursement is captured proactively while the physician is documenting within the chart.

Inserting HIM professionals into technology-driven projects such as an EHR implementation may seem like a daunting task, but HIM professionals are the stewards of the medical record content and therefore participation in these projects is critical. While HIM professionals may not always be the builders of the content in the EHR system, HIM input must be sought on what is built and how it will be implemented. HIM department involvement in training physicians to use these documentation tools is vital to ensuring the information is where it should be when and where it is needed. HIM must also be involved to ensure the data generated from an EHR can be analyzed and turned into useful information for quality of care, correct reimbursement, and operational efficiency.

HIM Must Know How to Use Data

As with any business, data has become a major component in analyzing past, present, and future performance in healthcare organizations. Enhanced technology has led to the creation, abstraction, and analysis of dynamic data from many sources in a rush to meet the demands of regulatory agencies, meaningful use, federal payment sources, healthcare reform, research initiatives, and overall population health. Data are also being relied upon for measuring quality outcomes, classification and coding systems, and reimbursement algorithms—and these areas are especially aligned with the skills of HIM professionals.

As a result of the push for data and information, many tools have been developed that can assist in abstracting and analyzing healthcare data. HIM professionals must take ownership of the task of gathering meaningful data and must understand the technology needed to govern this data throughout its lifecycle. Combining EHR technology, reporting tools, and multiple sources of data creates the perfect opportunity for HIM professionals to present the case for owning this information.

Get Involved with IG

One of the ways to accomplish this is for HIM professionals to develop an information governance (IG) task force or committee within the organization. IG is defined by AHIMA as "an organization-wide framework for managing information throughout its lifecycle and for supporting the organization's strategy, operations, regulatory, legal, risk, and environmental requirements."[1]

HIM professionals must take a leadership role on the IG committee. The first step to starting the IG process is to identify key departments within the organization that are needed to serve on the committee, including areas such as clinical workflow and informatics, revenue integrity, decision support and finance, compliance, quality resources and risk management, information systems, research and strategy, and senior leadership.

All of the data that is generated from clinical, financial, and operational sources must be modeled into information that can serve many different strategic purposes. As the leaders of IG, HIM professionals can ensure information is available for access through health information exchange (HIE), consolidated for reporting metrics to external sources, and analyzed for internal process improvements while also keeping the information secure and protected.

Own the EHR and IG, Or Someone Else Will

These initiatives are only the beginning of what is to come in the US healthcare system. HIM professionals must act as the experts in gathering information generated at the individual patient level within the EHR, analyzing aggregate patient population data, creating reports for examining documentation compliance, preparing data for health information exchange (HIE), trending financial and reimbursement data, protecting the confidentiality of protected health information, and many initiatives yet to come. HIM professionals must embrace all of the new healthcare changes and enhance skills wherever necessary to keep up with the ever changing healthcare environment. These tasks and future initiatives must be owned by HIM professionals because if they do not step up to govern the information and all of the surrounding implications for using healthcare data, someone else will.

Note

[1] AHIMA. "Information Governance Principles for Healthcare (IGPHC)™." 2014. http://research.zarca.com/survey.aspx?k=SsURPPsUQRsPsPsP&lang=0&data.

Erin Head (ErinHead711@gmail.com) is director of HIM at Parrish Medical Center, based in Titusville, FL. The views expressed in this article are solely the author's and not representative of Parrish Medical Center or any other affiliated organization.

Article citation:
Head, Erin. "Owning the EHR and Information Governance at Your Facility" *Journal of AHIMA* 86, no.8 (August 2015): 24-26.