

Practice Toolkit: Public Health

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by Carol Ann Quinsey, RHIA, CHPS

HIM professionals working in public health have the opportunity to make a difference in the health of neighbors, friends, and family members living in their communities. Public health includes both the care delivered to individuals and care delivered to populations of patients such as diabetics, asthmatics, children, pregnant mothers, the elderly, and the homeless.

Public health departments are typically large, complex organizations. Generally, reimbursement is received through grants and public funds rather than through the more familiar insurance billing model. Grant funding demands somewhat different documentation than care delivery systems, offering challenges in what may be thought of as usual processes.

HIM employees working in public health serve as resources in obtaining information about individuals being cared for in the public health system, respond to requests for information, and train staff in coding and other HIM functions. They assist in disaster preparation and have responsibilities both during and after actual disasters. They also assist in the analysis of county- and statewide health statistics and indicators for trends in public health.

For most HIM professionals in the public health sector, responsibilities extend well beyond traditional HIM roles. They work on community and state committees dealing with the exchange of information. Examples of some types of these programs are:

- Working with jails to exchange information related to public health initiatives with community-based organizations. HIM professionals coordinate these efforts and verify that information is exchanged in accordance with state and federal laws. They also ensure the information maintained by these agencies is secure and safe.
- Planning surveillance activities using syndromic reporting from hospitals, clinics, long-term care and rehabilitation facilities, and EMT companies.
- Plotting health and demographic data from state and county agencies on a countywide map to assist in planning for healthcare delivery.
- Working with school health programs, county agencies, local hospitals, and health departments.
- Working with true public health efforts such as communicable diseases, outbreaks, and environmental health. Special planning for communicable disease exposures in schools and other public locations is more frequent than most would think. Some examples include exposure to mercury, malaria, West Nile virus, and tuberculosis.
- Investigating vital statistics issues such as incorrect death certificates.

Historically, nursing issues have shaped public health departments, and nurses were expected to manage medical record processes and issues as part of their duties. In many cases, the medical record was not perceived to carry much value. Consequently, salaries and expectations of staff working with records were low. It has been an uphill battle working with county and state governments to enhance the requirements for qualified and trained staff, including supervisors managing medical record departments in medical centers. But slowly such changes are occurring. Today, the public health sector provides many opportunities for HIM professionals. Some of the titles, roles, and responsibilities include:

Privacy officer and information security coordinators contribute to or develop policies and procedures relative to information security, which includes maintaining all information (both public and confidential) in a secure and safe manner. Policies must be very detailed, include HIPAA requirements, and reflect the business needs of the agency, including information availability during disasters, disaster recovery, vital statistics, immunization planning, environmental health, and epidemiology.

Because the business is split between traditional medical care and public health functions, requests for information need to be evaluated as to whether HIPAA covers them. In this data-driven community many agencies request diagnostic information by zip code that require careful scrutiny before action is taken.

Diagnostic and procedure coding includes supervision of medical coders who review, code, and enter data into the billing system. Coders may be located at multiple sites throughout the county or state. This position also includes participation in billing meetings and review of cost reports and chargemaster for the agency.

HIM consultants act as consultants to the health department and clinical records department as well as support the clinical records committees both locally and on a statewide basis. Their duties include reviewing procedures, providing assistance in writing procedures, and developing training plans for staff. HIM consultants also respond to technical questions and plan for new locations or expansion of existing locations. They work with vendors on equipment purchases.

The electronic health record in public health will most likely be a byproduct of the clinical management systems under development. Some HIM professionals are fortunate enough to work on committees charged with development of clinical management systems. The challenges they face are similar to HIM professionals working in other settings.

The new clinical management systems will naturally result in changes to some HIM functions. Procedures and workflow processes will need to be revamped. Being at the planning table helps to anticipate and better prepare for these modifications.

Those working in public health say that it is an exciting setting in which to work. It is fraught with challenges, and it demands new ways of thinking about HIM. For those willing to accept the challenges, the work can be very rewarding.

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