Public Health and E-HIM: How EHRs Can Provide Data to Help Monitor the Population's Health

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As HIM professionals, we are well aware of the need for public, or population, health data. However, as we now enter the era of electronic health records (EHRs), our e-HIM™ and EHR implementations have not placed much emphasis on public health data. The 2001 anthrax attacks and the SARS outbreak have demonstrated the need for timely, complete public health data. This article discusses several initiatives designed to ensure governments have the data they need to protect the health of the population.

Public Health Data Are Different

Public health and public health data collection are targeted to the population as a whole, not to individual health data. Public health data need to support a wide range of activities including:

- Preventing epidemics and the spread of disease
- Protecting against environmental hazards
- Preventing injuries
- Promoting and encouraging healthy behaviors
- Responding to disasters and assisting communities in recovery
- Ensuring the quality and accessibility of healthcare for underserved populations[1]

To meet these needs, public health data must be broader than clinical data. Public health data include economic, sociocultural, and environmental data. Many state and federal government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) routinely conduct national surveys on a multitude of topics to gather, study, and report public health data. However, public health data also include clinical data. Unfortunately, the public health uses for EHR data are often not considered during software development or even standards specification.

Why EHR Data Are Needed

Using the EHR to provide data to public health entities has many potential benefits. Transmitting standardized clinical data automatically could:

- Save time reporting vital statistics and diseases
- Increase the reporting of notifiable diseases
- Improve public health reporting back to providers
- Enhance the ability to detect bioattacks or disease outbreaks[2]

Healthcare organizations would enjoy the benefit of entering the data once (for patient care) and using it many times.

There are currently two major national initiatives working to address the issues raised with public health data reporting and the EHR. The Public Health Data Standards Consortium (PHDSC) is a group of federal, state, and local health agencies; national and professional associations; public and private sector organizations; and individual members. (AHIMA is a member of PHDSC.) Created in 1998, PHDSC serves to "develop, promote, and implement data standards for population health practice and research."[3] Initially concerned with the public health implications of HIPAA, PHDSC has expanded its efforts to assist in the standardization of all public health data. Additional information can be found online at www.phdatastandards.info.

The second initiative is from the CDC, which launched the Public Health Information Network (PHIN) in 2003. PHIN's goal is "to implement a multi-organizational business and technical architecture for public health information systems."[4] PHIN is working to advance the national health information infrastructure and implement the Consolidated Health Informatics standards when possible. Additional information can be found at the PHIN Web site, www.cdc.gov/phin. HIM professionals may be especially interested in the section on vocabulary standards and specifications. In addition to detailing the PHIN standards, the site features the Vocabulary Access and Distribution System, where users can browse, search, and download code sets and concepts.

What Does This Mean for HIM?

There are many opportunities for HIM professionals within public health initiatives. First, HIM professionals involved in EHR specifications, development, or implementation should pay attention to their current public health reporting activities and ensure these are addressed with new systems.

Second, HIM professionals must ensure that any data collection meets federal and state guidelines, especially in relation to privacy. (HIPAA allows personal health information to be disclosed to public health authorities; however, CDC requests that personal identifiers be removed before data are submitted.) Third, if HIM professionals are not involved with public health data reporting in their organizations, they should approach the appropriate personnel to offer their expertise in data management, especially coding, classification, and data representation.

There are also many opportunities for HIM professionals in more traditional public health positions with federal, state, and local public health agencies. These professionals now have opportunities to become involved in health information exchange initiatives, ensuring that public health data needs are met. Public health will also play an important role in the development and utilization of a national health information network. HIM professionals also find careers in public health in community education and with nonprofit groups such as the Alzheimer's Association and March of Dimes. The need for health data is increasing in public health as in all other sectors of healthcare. HIM professionals are and will be needed.

Funding for Public Health Informatics

HIM professionals interested in public health and public health informatics are fortunate; there is funding from both the government and government-foundation partnerships for training and other efforts. This summer the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation issued a $3.68 million grant to the National Library of Medicine for training public health informatics professionals. The foundation also will award 20 grants to public health organizations to help them become involved in health information exchange. While some of these funding opportunities are time limited, others are ongoing.

The CDC offers a public health informatics fellowship program designed to "develop leaders skilled in the integration of public health information systems and development of data standards, policy, and quality control measures to advance the practice of public health informatics." For organizations wishing to provide clinical data from their EHRs, the CDC BioSense Data Provisioning Initiative may offer reimbursement to organizations that submit data.

Public health data and the field of public health informatics are promising areas of concentration for HIM professionals. Capturing public health data directly from the EHR is a focus for training and funding. HIM professionals will be needed to ensure the data are confidential, secure, accurate, and complete.

Notes

1. Public Health Data Standards Consortium. "Frequently Asked Questions." Available online at http://phdatastandards.info/faqs.htm#overview.
2. Overhage, Marc. "Public Health and Interoperability." CDC/PHIN 2005 Conference in Atlanta, GA.
3. Public Health Data Standards Consortium. "Frequently Asked Questions."
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "PHIN: Overview." Available online at www.cdc.gov/phin/overview.html.

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