

Putting Together the Privacy Puzzle

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by Jane Jeffries, MFA, managing editor

“With volunteering, I always get more back than I feel like I give. I’ve gotten to meet wonderful people and I’ve got a network that I can call on if I get stuck.”

—Rita Bowen, MA, RHIA, chief privacy officer, Erlanger Health System

How many of us are pursuing the career we chose when we were 14 years old? Rita Bowen, MA, RHIA, is—she traded her candy striping duties for work in medical records when she was barely a teenager. Now, she’s the chief privacy officer for Erlanger Health System, a 700-bed hospital with multiple clinics in eastern Tennessee.

As privacy officer, Bowen has administrative control of the facilities’ medical records but spends at least half her time performing risk assessments and educating staff on HIPAA privacy components. “It would have been easier just to videotape one session [for the whole system] but we wanted a dialogue with the staff so we could have a realistic picture of how patient information is used in our facility,” Bowen says.

One of the biggest challenges in privacy education is the size of the topic. “People aren’t aware of how patient information is used. And it’s not just medical records—it’s the concept that any information can identify a patient,” Bowen says. Suddenly, corporate policies are needed to address physicians taking laptops with patient information home or sending patient information via e-mail. “Medical staff peer review minutes are not appropriate for e-mail, but people have gotten used to e-mailing them,” Bowen notes. “People think e-mail is protected because it’s all hospital based, but it might not be. We have firewall protection, but we still have to train users.”

Bowen has also found that not everyone knows they can play a role in patient privacy. About a recent educational session with the guest representatives at the hospital front desk and the valet parking attendants, Bowen says, “I could tell I was losing them.” So she explained that most prominent people in the community would pass the front desk and use the valet service. Did the guest representatives and parking attendants ever discuss who they saw? “Then they understood,” Bowen says. “I try to bring education back home so it makes sense for their job.”

“I love seeing the light bulb go on for people,” Bowen adds. “People think they are isolated in their own world, but there’s no stand-alone department anymore. From my background in medical records, I can see how everything is interconnected. It’s like putting together a big puzzle.”

Grounded in Quality

The recipient of the 2001 Quality Management Section (QMS) Distinguished Member Award, Bowen was the chair of the 2001 QMS program committee. Although she hasn’t worked in quality management for several years, Bowen stayed involved in QM because she “never wanted to lose track of that knowledge.” In fact, it recently helped her earn a commendation from the Erlanger board of directors.

Using her background in QM, Bowen was able to reduce denied days from 6 percent to 1 percent, which had a major impact on the organization’s cash flow. Bowen also reduced the delinquent record count. “I used the process improvement approach to streamline the process as much as possible,” she says.

A Professional Campaign

Bowen had her eye on the privacy officer position since HIPAA was first drafted. As she watched the role evolve, she realized she needed additional education to meet the job's qualifications. She completed the College of St. Scholastica's distance learning HIM master's program with a final project focused on HIPAA and patient privacy and developing related educational materials.

When the privacy officer job was advertised at her facility, she wasn't the only candidate in line—two other management-level executives wanted the job. "Each person wrote a position statement explaining why they were qualified and what they could bring to the position. I had to campaign for the job," Bowen explains.

Despite her numerous responsibilities at work, Bowen still finds time to contribute to the HIM profession through volunteering. An active member of the Tennessee HIMA and recipient of its 2001 Achievement Award, she is the leader for external marketing and served as president in 1998. As president, Bowen attended the House of Delegates for three years. "It was a wonderful experience to see how our organization works," Bowen says. "I wouldn't have missed that opportunity for the world."

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