

Rare and Unlikely ICD-10 Codes are Needed

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This summer, if you listened very closely, you could almost hear a vast chorus of coders saying “I told you so,” after a freak accident alarmed local boaters in Southern California. On June 21, an over-excited dolphin accidentally jumped into a California family’s speed boat and broke both ankles of one of the passengers. Fortunately, the 350-pound dolphin and the injured woman reportedly both made recoveries.

But suddenly, the much mocked ICD-10 code for “struck by an orca” didn’t seem as ludicrous and superfluous as the ICD-10 naysayers would have you believe. While events like this are rare—and yes, unlikely—the codes generated by the resulting injuries have practical uses for research and fostering prevention.

Take, for example, the not-as-rare-as-you’d-think trend of death or injury via vending machine. According to a report in *The Guardian*, one physician from Walter Reed Medical Center, Dr. Michael Q. Casio, published a study in 1988 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* titled simply “[Soda Pop Vending Machine Injuries](#).”

Cosio’s primary method of research was time consuming searches through newspaper articles and interviews with victims and their family members. Imagine if he’d been able to do a simple search of ICD-10 claims data. An update to the original study was published in 1992 in the [Journal of Orthopaedic Trauma](#).

Convenience foods seem to be particularly problematic, as evidenced by a 1990 letter to the editor published in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), which was written by researchers investigating ocular injuries caused by microwave popcorn steam. Ironical fact: one of the letter’s authors suffered “superficial punctate staining to the corneas” due to his eagerness to see if all the kernels had popped. It goes without saying that the authors advocated for warnings to be printed on popcorn bags.

Sure, it’s tempting to bemoan bureaucracy and redundancy whenever ICD-10 comes up—but don’t doubt for one second that the creation of certain external cause codes might keep you safer on your next whale watching expedition, or while trying to retrieve the bag of Doritos stuck in your office vending machine.

ICD-10 is about more than adding new codes—the greater detail and depth, according to coding experts, will add specificity that both improves care and fine tunes reimbursement.

Article citation:

Journal of AHIMA Staff. "Rare and Unlikely ICD- 10 Codes are Needed" *Journal of AHIMA* 86, no.10 (October 2015): 80.

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