

Setting the Standards

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by Jane Jeffries, associate editor

After years of learning and teaching HIM, Mary Alice Hanken, PhD, RHIA, now develops the standards that shape it. Hanken leads an American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) subcommittee that authors the standards that are changing the meaning of security.

Hanken has worked with ASTM for more than 10 years. "When I started there, I realized AHIMA should be at the table," she says. As it became clear that security would be strongly linked to electronic medical record development, ASTM created a security subcommittee on policy, which Hanken chairs. The subcommittee focuses on privacy, confidentiality, and access policies for health information—issues that grow in relevance every day due to HIPAA and the industry-wide movement toward electronic health records.

A subcommittee on technical security issues soon followed. "Theoretically, policy should drive the technology," Hanken says. The subcommittee's recent efforts have produced HIPAA-related standards on access, individual rights, training, audit logs, and amendments. Currently, the committee is working on an e-mail standard and exploring data warehousing and clinical repository issues.

Devising standards can take six months to two years. Committee members first identify a need within an environment. Then, work groups are appointed to put together an initial draft of a standard and contact people with relevant knowledge. "It's like getting legislation through because it's a consensus-based process," explains Hanken. "The committees are made of people from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds—there has to be a broad representation of the field."

Avenues to Opportunities

Hanken's diverse HIM career paved the way for her present activities. She works as a consultant and currently focuses on mental health settings. In addition to leading the ASTM security subcommittee, Hanken also serves on the Washington HIMA health information technology committee, which educates members about technology and raises technology funds for HIM education programs. Hanken also teaches one to two classes a year on financial management in healthcare and quality improvement at the University of Washington. Further, she is a research associate in a project studying caregivers and schizophrenics and is the author of two HIM books.

"Part of what I like [about this profession] is that there's always something going on. There are lots of new opportunities for people who are willing to step up and say 'I can do that,' Hanken says. "There are opportunities along a number of different avenues—the change from record production departments to taking on different roles in terms of supporting clinicians, designing systems, and using data. The HIM field is a lot more project management oriented now. Plus, new graduates are often willing to take on new roles and the university has always encouraged and supported them in that approach."

Staking a Claim

Hanken argues that part of HIM professionals' future success lies in gathering information and then sharing knowledge. "In our field, we don't have much of a research base," she says. "We haven't really stepped up to the plate to provide research leadership in areas we want to claim knowledge in."

Much of the problem can be attributed to a lack of resources, according to Hanken. "People who have gotten PhDs are largely on the education side [of HIM] and are busy teaching. These programs are small and can't free up one or two faculty members to put effort into research projects," she says. HIM professionals outside academic settings encounter a different hurdle. "They need to have synergy with university environments. There's a lot of expertise that goes into developing and submitting a proposal for funding—and that's at universities. Getting a proposal off the ground takes a lot of effort."

To Hanken, the solution is a willingness to learn. "You have to be really open to trying new ways to use your skills and background for growth," she stresses. "People think they need to be 100 percent prepared to take on a new project. But when opportunity presents itself, almost nobody has the exact training or background for it. So you're always learning. And that's what keeps life interesting."

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