

Speaking Up for HIM

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by Jane E. Blumenthal

Her voice bubbling with enthusiasm, Ramona Fissinger, RHIT, describes her job as "typical of most other medical records director positions." But Fissinger, director of medical records services at the Community Hospital in Munster, IN, has a passion for health information management that is anything but typical. Her dedication to the profession recently led her to Washington, DC, where she played an important role in teaching several hundred healthcare attorneys about compliance.

The journey began when Fissinger attended a corporate compliance seminar sponsored by her hospital. The seminar, which primarily targeted physicians, featured a speaker who particularly held her interest--a US assistant attorney for the Department of Justice (DOJ). While he knew his subject well, Fissinger felt that his perspective on coders did not present the entire picture.

Bothered by the missing links in his speech, Fissinger caught up with the assistant attorney after the meeting. After briefly discussing her HIM perspective, the two went their separate ways.

Fissinger remained unaware of her influence until the following week. Then, the attorney, who until then had never spoken to a coder, invited her to Washington, DC, to participate in a presentation on corporate compliance.

The presentation, which took place at a conference for healthcare attorneys, walked the audience through a healthcare compliance investigation--from whistle-blowing to full-blown federal investigation. For Fissinger, it was a unique opportunity to educate others about the HIM perspective while learning at the same time.

"It was a really interesting experience for me," she says. "I had the opportunity to see how the investigation process would work and what to expect if it should happen at my facility. I also loved being able to represent the HIM point of view and having the chance to discuss my views further with members of the DOJ."

Spreading the Word

Fissinger is excited that HIM is becoming more visible in all areas of healthcare. She notes with pride that her department is "involved as a profession with everything that goes on in the hospital," she says. "People recognize what we have to offer, so we get involved more often on the front end of things."

But getting there takes effort. "I appreciate the fact that the medical records department's input is sought out, but we have to remember that it's a two-way street. It takes a lot of smaller public relations efforts from individual medical records professionals." These "PR efforts," Fissinger suggests, can begin with targeting areas in your facility where your HIM skills can be of assistance. Then make sure everyone knows how you and your department can help.

On-the-Job Assistance

In addition to enhancing her department's image, one of Fissinger's greatest challenges these days is maintaining a fully staffed department. Keeping her staff satisfied and motivated is an ongoing process. How does she do it?

First, Fissinger relies heavily on her own enthusiasm. A good attitude, she says, makes her own job more interesting and helps her effectively manage the medical records department. "It really filters down to the rest of the department," she says.

Her zeal is, in part, sparked by knowledge. She uses a number of resources to keep up to date on current issues, including audio conferences and regular get-togethers with former HIM program classmates. She also meets once a month with other HIM directors in the area, using the time to network and discuss job-related issues. And by attending the Indiana HIMA annual meeting and various seminars, Fissinger meets new people and gains a broader perspective on industry events.

She credits her success to an open mind and advises HIM professionals, especially those just starting their careers, to learn everything they can on the job. "Each of my jobs has been a building block for the next step in my career," she says. "Don't say 'no' to any opportunity. Knowledge makes you more marketable."

Jane E. Blumenthal, a freelance writer in Kansas City, MO, is a former associate editor of the Journal of AHIMA.

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