

Speaking the Same Language: Terminology Analyst Strives for Standardization

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by Jewelle Hicks, publications manager

Melanie S. Loucks, MA, RHIT, is a terminology analyst for the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) in Salt Lake City, UT. In this role, she participates in developing the process for implementing standardized terminology for use in the VA's electronic health record (EHR). As part of her role, Loucks authors standardized data elements and deploys them for use by the VA's 163 medical centers.

Her other responsibilities include applying sound terminology principles to the application standard, validating relationships and properties for specific concepts, and mapping. Loucks sums up the VA's objective as simply "trying to speak the same language through the use of standardized terminologies so that data can be shared, understood, and retain the same meaning across systems."

Talking the Talk

Loucks uses clinical terminologies such as SNOMED CT and LOINC as well as the ICD-9-CM classification system to manage her standardization projects. She explains that the VA complies with the federal government's Consolidated Health Informatics initiative, now under the direction of the Healthcare Information Technology Standards Panel recommendations for messaging and clinical data standards. For example, standardizing the VA's problem list application requires following the recommendation for the adoption of SNOMED CT, while clinical encounters require the adoption of Health Level Seven (HL7) defined value sets.

Loucks notes that SNOMED CT has many varied applications for the VA because of its comprehensiveness. For instance, the terminology is being embedded for end users within the problem list application in a pick list format. It is also being used as a mediation service for data exchange between the VA and Department of Defense clinical data repositories for sharing values of lab test results and allergy reactions. SNOMED CT is also being used in mapping to legacy data and to administrative code sets such as ICD-9-CM.

"Clinical terminologies and classification systems represent a common medical language; however, they have different levels of granularity and structures and can be used for different purposes," Loucks says. "Nevertheless, they both must exist in EHR systems because they provide computability, interoperability, and will contribute to the overall effort of the national health information infrastructure."

Laying the Foundation

Loucks explains that a previous position testing HL7 messages and ANSI X12 transactions exposed her to other standards development organizations. Her experience in the development and distribution of regulatory releases provided the background for her terminology work and piqued her interest in the field. "I felt it was a natural transition for an HIM professional," she says.

Looking Ahead

When asked about a career highlight, Loucks states enthusiastically, "It's now!" She explains that working to apply standardized terminology across the VA is very rewarding. "These efforts will support the development of the longitudinal patient health record, improve computerized decision support, and ultimately improve the quality, safety, and cost of patient care for our veterans."

This is a very exciting time at the VA, Loucks notes. “We are constantly striving to improve patient care and reduce costs by eliminating the need for redundant tests,” she says. Her past track record indicates she is well on her way.

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