Taking Coding to the Clinical Floor

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by Meg Featheringham, assistant editor

As documentation specialist at Deaconess Medical Center in Spokane, WA, Amy Gardner walks a tight rope between the HIM and clinical worlds. Gardner, RHIT, reviews charts on the cardiovascular floor of Deaconess, identifying gaps in documentation and querying physicians for follow-up.

"It very much is a balancing act," she says. "I feel as though I am almost part of two departments in the hospital."

This balancing act requires Gardner to devote time with both cardiologists and the HIM staff. "It's splitting your loyalties— being an active member in the HIM department and being an active member in the cardiac line, taking time to get to know the people that you see every day, and developing those interactions and those relationships on both levels."

Learning the Basics

Gardner began her HIM career in a medical record department assembling and analyzing medical records, eventually working up to coding emergency room records, outpatient surgery, and eventually inpatient charts. "I've been pretty blessed to be able to work in almost every aspect of a medical record department," she says.

She eventually worked as a personal injury protection adjuster for an automobile insurance company. However, she returned to coding once she realized it was her true calling. "I realized my first love was coding and went back to that."

Her husband's job transfer to a new area led her to her current position. She read about the position for a documentation specialist and thought "I can do that. That's right up the alley of what I've been doing all these years."

She applied for the position, even though the requirements stated that the facility was looking for a registered nurse. Gardner was eventually granted an interview and hired on.

"I noted in the [news]paper not long after I had applied that they began looking for RNs and RHITs or RHIAs," she says. Deaconess recognized the benefits of having someone with a coding background as a clinical documentation specialist.

Coding Background Helpful

Her coding background helps tremendously when talking with physicians about necessary documentation. "I think my background in coding helps me to be able to develop and build credibility in the physicians' eyes," she says. "[Physicians] like being able to see that concrete block that you can give to them and say 'Here, this is why.' Then that credibility and that belief and the buy-in to what you're doing begins."

Being a documentation specialist has opened up a whole new world for Gardner, allowing her invaluable education from the clinicians she works with. "As a coder, you take anatomy and physiology and you take pharmacology, but you don't ever see how it actually works," she says.

In her current role, she's learning the hows of the various medical conditions. "I have been so fortunate to be able to have people—physicians and nurses—be willing to sit down and say, 'This is how this physiologically works in the heart.'" The cardiologists have also invited her to attend their bimonthly cardiovascular conference where they discuss their various cases.

Gardner has used this knowledge to educate coding professionals at her facility. She also educates physicians on MS-DRGs and other topics that come up with coding changes and specificity of documentation.

As such, she has become a sort of liaison, or go-between, between the two staffs, decreasing any tension. "It helps to alleviate the us-them relationship that so often develops between coders and physicians—on both sides," she says.

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