

Three Cs for Better Coding: Coding Community Council Takes Expertise Online

Save to myBoK

by Rita Scichilone, MHSA, RHIA, CCS, CCS-P, CHC

Some people might believe that selecting the right clinical code number is roughly equivalent to the process of finding a phone number to order a pizza.

You can use a book with an index, or its electronic equivalent, to locate the numbers required, then push some buttons and the “send” key. If the number you used is correct, the connection works and the pizza you crave will soon be on its way to your front door.

But what if you need a very special type of pizza and you are in a hotel room miles away from home? Then you really need advice. You might turn for help to the hotel staff, browse the yellow pages, or call a friend. Even when you find a number for a place that looks promising, you might be worried about the choice.

Suppose there was an Internet site where you could log on, any time of the day or night, and find others with pizza parlor expertise, a place where hundreds or thousands of pizza lovers gather and can help you with your selection. Now instead of pizza, think about finding help with clinical code reporting. Consider the wide variety of questions that arise when you find yourself “out of your element” and in need of help to find the right resources. AHIMA members visiting the Coding Community of Practice (CoP) at www.ahima.org have such a resource as close as their Internet connection.

Short-order Resources

Selecting diagnosis and procedure code numbers is much more complicated and important than finding pizza in unfamiliar territory. Because code selection is a blend of analysis and predetermined protocols, coding professionals often seek guidance and advice from others in making decisions about code reporting. Official references are sometimes the only solution to a coder’s dilemma in finding the right number before hitting that “send” button—which connects to a variety of external agencies, including third-party payers—but circumstances frequently arise in which accurate, complete, and practical help is available without delay.¹

The Coding Community Council (CCC) is a group of dedicated volunteers who are willing to share their experience, resources, and knowledge of clinical coding with others. Twelve experienced coding professionals are scheduled in rotation to provide heightened awareness and online help to coding community members. Their role within the community is much like that of a city council—to provide leadership and guidance to colleagues looking for help. One tool they use is the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) resource, available in the Coding CoP, to provide answers to questions posed by members about code assignments.

FAQs to the Rescue

An example of a FAQ available on the Coding CoP, contributed by Judy Bielby, RHIA, CCS:

Q. When assigning CPT codes, the coder occasionally must determine whether or not the procedure was performed under anesthesia. Does the term “anesthesia” include local anesthesia and conscious sedation?

A. No, it does not include local anesthesia or conscious sedation. According to *CPT Assistant*, CPT “codes having the descriptor ‘requiring anesthesia’ mean requiring general anesthesia.” See

“Musculoskeletal System Manipulation” in the January 1999 issue of *CPT Assistant* for details. *CPT Assistant* is published by the American Medical Association.

FAQ Shortcuts

The CCC aims to build resources that benefit the entire AHIMA community and contribute to the consistency and reliability of clinical coding. Its charge is to research selected coding questions in the Coding CoPs and create a response for posting as a FAQ.

Using the FAQ function facilitates easier searches by condition, procedure, or code number. All FAQs have the letters CQ included as key term, so this can be used as a shortcut to a full search for all coding questions made available by the CCC.

Finding coding help is much easier than finding a good pizza with anchovies. Members can log in to the CoP, click the Join/Visit Communities button, and select the Coding community. Within the Coding CoP, review the items in the FAQ section or submit a question using the guidelines approved by the CCC. Guidelines are found in the Community Resources section in the “General” category as a document titled “FAQ Guide.” Detailed instructions about posting questions maximize the efficiency of the process.

A Word about Answers to Coding Questions

Remember the quest for a special kind of pizza? No matter who helps you in your search, you may or may not agree with the recommendation you receive. In fact, as writer Erica Jong once noted, “Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer, but wish we didn’t.”²

With coding questions, it is not unusual to seek justification for choosing a particular code in order to trigger health plan coverage or just make a point with a colleague or supervisor. Special care must be taken to make sure all of the evidence is gathered and all circumstances that may affect the answers to coding questions are uncovered. “Proceed with Caution,” below, shows the disclaimer notes found within the Community Resources section of the Coding CoP.

Proceed with Caution

The disclaimer notes found within the Community Resources section of the Coding CoP read as follows:

AHIMA cannot serve as the official source of coding advice, and information taken from the Community FAQs should not be taken out of context and applied to specific situations.

The FAQs posted in this community will cite official references or accepted coding guidelines or clinical reference.

There are some questions that must be processed through official channels for a definitive answer. This process is outlined on every coding community, and Internet links are provided in the communities for assistance.

Answers to the questions are provided by a community-based volunteer panel and subsequently reviewed by AHIMA professional practice staff before posting as a FAQ to ensure validity and reliability.

Feedback concerning answers and/or the FAQ process is always welcome by the CCC and the AHIMA practice staff who support their efforts.

The Minds behind the Mastery

Twelve heads are always better than one in figuring out the complexities of code selection and reporting for optimal reimbursement, compliance, and data management. CCC members hail from all over the country and work in a variety of settings. All of the leaders listed in “Ask the Experts,” below, are outstanding in this area of HIM practice and enjoy helping others with coding problems. These dedicated leaders within the CoP are willing to share the benefit of their experience.

Renato Estrella, MS, RHIA, a medical coding expert with a career that spans more than 33 years in healthcare, shares that his participation in the process keeps him “educated and up to date.” He encourages all members to avail themselves of this resource.

Barb Abbadini, RHIT, is an allied health education and coding instructor and serves as a consultant for agencies investigating coding billing fraud and abuse; she is active in the West Virginia coding roundtables.

“Coding has evolved during the last 20 years into a ‘learning-intense’ career track,” says HIT instructor and CCC member Kathleen Peterson, RHIA, CCS. “Coding professionals have an enormous responsibility, requiring vigilance with regard to the current regulatory updates and clinical issues. As coding professionals, we are a community with unique questions.”

Visit the Coding CoP soon to see what’s new in coding practice issues or find help with a clinical coding–related question. The next time you see one of these committed leaders, you could ask them about the best place to find great pizza, but be sure to also thank them for the many contributions they make in the coding community by providing resources and sharing their expertise and clinical coding skills.

For more information about the CCC’s activities or to become more involved in the process, please contact Sarah Wills-Dubose, practice manager, coding products and services, at sarah.wills-dubose@ahima.org.

Ask the Experts

CCC leaders who served in 2003 include:

Barb Abbadini, RHIT	Janice Noller, RHIA, CCS, CPHQ
Judy Bielby, RHIA, CCS	Kathleen Peterson, RHIA, CCS
Janet Clarkson, RHIT	Brenda Tomlinson, RHIA
Renato Estrella, MS, RHIA	Myrna Wells, MS, RHIA, CCS-P
Rebecca Hancock, RHIA, CCS	Carol Sue Wilson, RHIT, CCS
Jan Martin, RHIT, CCS	Kara Wolfe, RHIT

Notes

1. Brouch, Kathy. “Where to Find Answers to Your Coding Questions.” *Journal of AHIMA* 74, no. 1 (2003): 84–86.
2. Quoted in “How to Save Your Own Life,” in *Webster’s New Explorer Dictionary of Quotations*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2000, p. 10.

Rita Scichilone (rita.scichilone@ahima.org) is AHIMA’s director of coding products and services.

Article citation:

Scichilone, Rita. “The Three Cs for Better Coding: Coding Community Council Takes Expertise Online.” *Journal of AHIMA* 75, no.3 (March 2004): 64-65.

