

Thrill of the Unexpected

Save to myBoK

by Claire Dixon-Lee, PhD, RRA

It's hard to imagine that we are approaching the close of the twentieth century. As I examine my reaction to the start of this year, perhaps I speak for many of you in that I have mixed emotions. On one hand, I am filled with nostalgia for all of the events that affected my life growing up in this century—personal accomplishments, joyous celebrations, and births, as well as sadness at the loss of loved ones and friends—and wonder as I recall the many challenges that have affected my daily life, workplace, and health. I even think about how it might have felt in 1899 to anticipate this century beckoning.

On the edge of the 21st century, we are making plans and resolutions as we always do at the start of a new year, but with the anticipation and thrill of the unexpected. New technologies are developing so quickly we hardly have time to use them before a replacement appears. In 1999 there is a sense of urgency—that we have to accomplish some extraordinary feats before the new century dawns—and this is realistic, given Year 2000 technology concerns. But this year also is different because we must lay groundwork for ourselves and for future generations. Our groundwork will be based on predictions and assumptions of how our world will change as ideas, technology, medical advances, and even our population rapidly expand.

As we prepare for AHIMA's transition into the 21st century, can events and milestones that shaped our profession during the past 70 years give us clues to our future? How often were we on the forefront of new concepts and ideas, and how often did we have to react very quickly?

A Century of Change

Our stage was set by an editorial in the May 1919 issue of *Hospital Management* that warned the medical profession that "...case records are the visible evidence of what the hospital is accomplishing."¹ This has become apparent today as the fabric of healthcare delivery has changed, but the capture and documentation of health information remains a major challenge. Advances in new medical therapies, improvements in hospital care, and a growing need for the oversight of medical education led to an October 1928 conference in Chicago that established the 35-member Association of Record Librarians of North America.

After World War II, the demand for medical research revealed the need for data, so we started keeping logs of diagnoses and procedures. We learned to adapt to microfilm for preservation of key medical record data. Meanwhile, on the horizon appeared the first commercial use of computers, which would drastically change our lives in the years ahead. The Medicare and Medicaid programs placed entirely new demands on our management processes. In 1979, we mounted a national educational campaign about ICD-9-CM, which was followed by DRGs and massive cost containment efforts in healthcare. The emergence of AIDS in the 1980s brought new challenges to hospital policies and procedures on patient confidentiality. We created innovative approaches to maintaining privacy while collecting valuable data sought by those working to find a cure.

In the 1990s, health information managers are taking up new positions in the information age—and the need to expedite better medical documentation has never been greater. As we conclude a century that has brought tremendous change to our lives and workplaces, as a profession we must now deal with increasingly complex problems—greater concerns about privacy and confidentiality, the Internet's impact on clinical data transmission, connecting information across the healthcare enterprise, and the rights of the consumer who must make educated choices to expect and demand the best healthcare.

What lies ahead for AHIMA and its members? Where and how do we fit in? What have we learned about ourselves and our Association that will help us carve out new roles for success in the 21st century? Will we be prepared? As history shows, we have always managed, but now we once again have a chance, as in 1928, to lead the way.

Education, Change, and Commitment

One signpost of opportunity is a recent quote from Peter Drucker: "For 50 years, the information revolution has centered on data and the T in IT;...the next revolution will focus on the meaning of I—Information."² This is another opportunity for us to lead. As health information managers, we understand the concepts, processes, sources, and flow of clinical information. Partnering with experts in technology and the clinicians who generate data, we can find new ways to capture and translate it into meaningful, accurate, complete information.

AHIMA has been a part of my life for 30 years. I have always looked to the Association to keep me current on industry trends and to provide a network of professionals with whom I could identify and share practice issues and concerns. I always felt comforted knowing that somewhere within the AHIMA membership, someone else was struggling with the same issues I faced. For AHIMA to become an association of the 21st century, it will need a talented and dedicated staff teamed with volunteers who are fundamental to AHIMA's progress. Finding time to volunteer at the national, state, and local levels is critical to the future of this profession, yet difficult to justify in our busy lives. While volunteering requires participation and an accelerated plan of time management, its rewards are truly satisfying.

Education, in all its forms, is vitally important to our professional stature and personal success. Given the rapidly changing world in which we live, accepting lifelong learning in the workplace is a habit we all have to develop. We can all benefit from new educational delivery methods, such as teleseminars and Internet-based programming, which will become more commonplace in the future. In terms of formal academic education, it is crucial that AHIMA continue its efforts to support educators and the implementation of model HIM curricula in our colleges and universities. We must increase our stature in scholarly and research circles to find new ways to contribute and to gain the respect of our colleagues in the healthcare industry.

The changes we have seen in technology, our workplace, and our professional and personal lives are escalating every year. We can anticipate greater and more frequent changes in our healthcare organizational structures. Eventually, technology will solve data entry at the point of care with advanced human-computer interface tools. We can expect to see wider use of knowledge-based decision support systems that clinicians can learn to trust, accomplishments in biologic modeling systems, and standards for data structure, encoding, and interchange that will allow information systems to easily communicate and compare data. We can also expect continued evolution of the healthcare consumer movement, which will prompt the call for better information to make informed healthcare decisions.

My personal commitment to AHIMA this year is to demonstrate leadership in upholding the goal of quality health information that leads the momentum toward realizing new opportunities in Vision 2006 roles. You, too, have a commitment—and remembering that commitment in whatever role you choose to play in HIM will guide your decisions, earn respect, and facilitate your place in this industry.

As a profession, we are at the intersection of medical innovation, computer technologies, and information. While our role at this intersection is a vital one, no single individual stands alone. As an AHIMA member, you have a partnership with the Association—and you have an opportunity to communicate your ideas and influence through AHIMA's Web page, regional Team Talks, *Journal of AHIMA* articles, and activities like student mentoring and representing the profession as a volunteer in your community. We have daily opportunities to exercise our influence if we use some creativity and take some risks.

I am honored and proud to serve AHIMA this year alongside so many talented volunteers and staff. Your membership and interest count now more than ever. I am looking forward to our collective enthusiasm as we put our new knowledge to work and meet the challenges of 1999, laying the groundwork for our professional transition to the new millennium.

Notes

1. Huffman, Edna K. *Medical Record Management*, 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: Physicians' Record Company, 1959, p. 21.
2. Drucker, Peter F. "The Next Information Revolution." *Forbes* ASAP (August 24, 1998): 47-59.

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