

# Treating Physician Practices with a 5 Percent Solution

Save to myBoK

*by Kevin Heubusch, managing editor*

It's an amazing challenge," Suzanne Columbus admits. By 2008 the senior EHR implementation advisor must help at least 500 physician practices adopt health IT.

Columbus works at IPRO, New York State's quality improvement organization (QIO). That puts her in the middle of the Doctors Office Quality–Information Technology project (DOQ-IT), the national initiative funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. For the next three years, IPRO and other QIOs will work intensively with at least 5 percent of primary care physician practices in their states to help them adopt health IT or use their existing technology effectively for care management and improved care quality.

## A Good Start to System Selection

Columbus helps physician practices begin at the beginning, with assessment and documentation of current workflow and subsequent identification of IT needs. She helps with the basics of good systems selection strategies and even good business skills, down to tips on holding productive meetings, if necessary.

To help practices navigate the daunting process of choosing a system, Columbus conducts "vendor demonstration days," introducing practices and IT vendors. She preps the practices on topics such as the questions to ask and how to conduct a vendor demonstration. For vendors, she provides a list of the functionalities that a physician office needs to have demonstrated.

## Adding HIM to an IT Background

Columbus's interest in HIM began at Hebrew Hospital Home in New York. As senior project manager and assistant director of IS, Columbus implemented an enterprise-wide information system and trained the HIM staff of the organization's new Westchester facility.

This is where Columbus first worked directly with medical records, and she quickly developed an interest in HIM. "I decided then that I wanted to learn more about the field," she says. "I realized what I had known all along—that I wanted to do more with technology and HIM."

Juggling a busy work schedule, she began attending the HIT program at Suffolk Community College. While there she found her current job. A professor saw an open position posted on the IPRO Web site and thought she would be a perfect fit.

## Turning I Can't into I Can

"I'd like to say there are no challenges, just opportunities, for HIM professionals," Columbus says. "But in the migration to the paperless world we do have some challenges. The biggest is keeping our skills current with the ever-evolving technologies." To remain at the forefront, she says, it's critical to build a skill set that includes leadership and management skills, clinical knowledge, and IT.

Her biggest challenge at the moment is overcoming resistance to change. "Change is a difficult concept to manage," she says. "It's not just the physicians who have to change the way they handle clinical documentation, orders, and prescriptions—their office staffs have to change how they process information in a world without paper."

Columbus faces this challenge by "turning I can't into I can." She says, "I make them want to change by showing them what they can do, how they can do it, and what they can do with it once they know how."

“I feel like I’m empowering my docs and their staff with knowledge so they can make some positive changes in the practice,” she says. “It feels good at the end of the day to think that maybe in some way I can have a positive impact on the care someone receives.”

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