

Universal View of Data

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by Anne Zender, MA, director of communications

"You don't need to be a computer programmer to do [data management]. You need to know how to manage data. The rest will fall into place." --Lorraine Tully, director of HIM, HealthMarket, on getting started in data management

Understanding the big picture: that's what Lorraine Tully, RHIT, believes is the key to success in data management. As director of HIM at HealthMarket, based in Norwalk, CT, she should know--she manages data every day.

"[Data management] is the challenge of capturing, collecting, and warehousing data and converting it to information and applied knowledge," says Tully. "HIM professionals are key people to do this."

At HealthMarket, a company that sells self-directed health plans to small businesses, Tully's department creates a framework that facilitates the flow of data and clinically interprets information. She's also providing clinical leadership for an upcoming product incorporating episodes of care, a methodology that assesses a range of services, instead of individual visits or hospitalizations, provided along the continuum of care.

In addition, Tully is involved in projects such as data mapping for a Web interface, constructing data tables for warehousing, and utilization reporting. "Connection of information is very exciting, both for our department and for the profession," she says.

Making Data Meaningful

Tully got her start in HIM with clerical work and moved into coding and transcription. She also did utilization review (UR), DRG validation, and auditing. When she took a job doing medical analysis at Oxford Health Plans, "it pulled together all of the experiences I had and opened up a new world of opportunity for me," Tully says. "My talents in coding, DRGs, and UR fit so nicely into the data world of healthcare claims."

More than two years ago, she was invited to join HealthMarket, then a startup, through contacts she had made in her work in medical analysis. Tully, who wanted a new challenge, took the opportunity.

For Tully, making data meaningful means being able to provide her coworkers with the information they need. HIM professionals are the best people to do this, she says, because they know how information touches each division of the organization. "People don't know what kind of data to ask for," she says. "HIM professionals have a universal view of the processes behind the data, so they understand the impact of the data elements and can deliver correct information to the customer."

As a result, it's always a pleasure to use data to answer a question or solve a problem. "You really have to think: Do I have the information at hand, or do I need to create a work-around to gather the data? My background has enabled me to focus the data," she says.

"It Makes a Universe of Thousands Seem Very Close"

To keep her view of the big picture of HIM intact, Tully has recently taken on a new challenge. She facilitates the data management Community of Practice (CoP), AHIMA's online networking tool. She says it's a great way to network, although being a facilitator takes some time. "I enjoy getting involved," she says. "[The CoP] makes a universe of thousands of HIM professionals seem very close."

Her biggest challenge is to keep up with new developments in HIM. Because she doesn't work in a traditional setting, getting the latest news about coding, HIPAA, and other changing topics requires some extra effort. "Wherever you work, you need to

keep a universal view and know what's going on," she says.

And a still bigger challenge, Tully believes, is getting more HIM colleagues involved in the world of data management. "When I heard the term 'data mapping,' I was scared at first, but it makes sense," she says. "[Data management] may sound scary, but it's not. It's very easy. People who have spent years in the HIM department can do it."

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