

VA Puget Sound Reaps Benefits of Automation

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by Jill Burrington-Brown, MS, RHIA

What is it like to work in a fully automated healthcare system? As a visitor, I was doubly curious, because the topic of my management practicum in 1977 was preparing the Veterans Affairs Puget Sound Health Care System MPI for computerization. This was a sophisticated practicum at the time because no other facility in the area was moving toward computerization. Plus, there were two MPIs: one in medical records and one in admitting and they did not match, which created an abundance of duplicate MPI numbers and records.

I wanted to know how the facility had changed, given the leadership's push toward computerization. In short, everything was different. The sophisticated vision of 1977 has materialized into a completely automated system.

Less Paper, More Responsibility

The VA Puget Sound won the Nicholas E. Davies CPR Recognition Award of Excellence in 2000 for the implementation of its Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS). The system was developed in 1997 to support note and order entry, rules-based order checking, and results reporting. In addition, CPRS is integrated with a number of applications used throughout the VA, as well as an imaging system for radiology, ECG, and other documents.¹

One of the key roles in the HIM department is the automated data processing applications coordinator (ADPAC). This position is responsible for orienting new users, tracking requests for note templates, writing data retrieval programs, and managing all of the HIM computer applications. According to Susan Helbig, MA, RHIA, director of HIM at VA Puget Sound, "every HIM department needs an ADPAC" to coordinate systems and interact with other departments. In the VA HIM department, the ADPAC has written several programs, including one designed to monitor transcription production.

Meanwhile, as the VA becomes more automated, the file room is open fewer hours. In fact, the file room manager has been responsible for bringing potential HIM applications to the attention of the CPRS project manager for automation, reducing the need for paper records.

Currently, the VA Puget Sound has 46,000 outpatient visits per month and only the ophthalmology and research clinics require some kind of paper record. Inpatient medical records were totally automated in June 2001 and are printed only at a patient's death or transfer to another VA location. The file room manager pioneered a process in which a patient's existing paper records are sent to the VA nearest his or her location, using the VA's MPI. This has greatly reduced the amount of paper and made information more useable across the VA system.

System Improves Care, Documentation

Order entry is built on order sets and organizational guidelines.² The order entry system not only reduces the likelihood of errors, such as allergies and drug interactions, but also reminds practitioners of care guidelines. Similarly, progress note templates have been built to assist clinicians in documenting appropriate information. Notes are either dictated or entered by the practitioner. Those who choose to enter their own notes can use one of 2,500 available templates available, which requests the necessary data, then formats it into a readable note.

The practitioner can also copy data, such as lab results, and paste it into the note. The templates have helped improve the quality of the documentation, though note length has increased. In fact, the VA is training practitioners how to write concise notes and avoid copying other data.

Coding and transcription are mainly outsourced, but they are entirely automated. The managers in charge of transcription, professional services (outpatient coding), and inpatient processing (coding and completion) come from a variety of backgrounds

within the VA.

For other facilities considering a transition to an automated environment, the VA's HIM leadership offered the following advice:

- Aim for a **variety of age groups** in your department management
- **Meet regularly** to discuss issues and concerns
- Don't overlook **competent people in other areas**; bring them in and use their expertise
- **Break large tasks into smaller pieces** and strive for incremental improvements. The staff will notice and appreciate these improvements
- Use **hard data** to track improvements or problems

Considering automation? The nation's largest integrated healthcare system met the implementation challenges head on and now provides better care—you can make it happen in your organization, too.

Notes

1. *Sixth Annual Nicholas E. Davies Award: Proceedings of the CPR Recognition Symposium*. Chicago: CPRI-Host/McGraw-Hill Healthcare Education Group, 2000, p. 75.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

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