

# When Inmates Become Patients

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*by Jane Jeffries, associate editor*

When you think of places to expand your professional horizons, prison is probably not the first venue that comes to mind. But that's where Maryanne Perlmutter, MPH, RHIA, CPHQ, CCHP, found her ideal job.

As standards compliance coordinator at the Central California Women's Facility, the largest women's prison in the country, Perlmutter's daily responsibilities encompass the spectrum of HIM issues for the prison's skilled nursing facility: quality improvement, problem solving for policies and procedures, ambulance response times, dental care, and maintaining confidentiality in prison clinics.

"One of the things I truly love about this position is that it's broken me away from just medical records and gotten me involved in everything in healthcare," she says. "My job doesn't stop at documentation-I get involved with the implementation of documentation." Recent issues range from designing a form to ensure inmates receive test results from physicians and appropriate medical follow-up to solving the theft of skilled nursing facility blankets to the biohazards of cleaning vents in isolation rooms.

## Unique Challenges

One of the major challenges of prison healthcare is managing medications. Perlmutter monitors the inventory of so-called "hot drugs," which include narcotics and other medications. "There are stringent security concerns everywhere, but they are heightened in prison, because there are very few drugs that prison inmates are allowed to have on hand," she says. Instead, the inmates go to a pill line, where medications are dispensed by medical technical assistants. Keeping these medications confidential is another challenge, especially when dispensing the HIV drug cocktails needed by many inmates.

Sometimes, the prison's mission and the healthcare clinic's mission are at odds with each other. "The no. 1 mission of the prison is to keep the population secure from prisoners-to protect the public at large," says Perlmutter. "This can conflict with our mission because people have a right to healthcare."

Recently, the health services division and the prison's custody division tackled a complicated problem related to medical emergencies. During medical emergencies, the inmate is taken out of the prison to a hospital and followed by a chase car. But before she can leave the prison, the custody division needs to be notified so it can check the inmate's files to see who her enemies and family are in order to properly equip the chase car in case the ambulance is ambushed. This process can delay the inmate's medical care as well as violate her privacy if the officers want to know what's wrong. As a solution, the prison now automatically equips the chase car with the maximum number of officers and highest fire power during the highest level of healthcare emergency (when the ambulance uses lights and sirens) so custody won't have to first check the inmate's files. It facilitates prompt, confidential healthcare while protecting the patient, the healthcare providers, and the public.

## Safety Behind Bars

According to Perlmutter, "the facility is lit up like daylight all the time" to ensure safety. She adds that officers will check on her if her phone is off the hook for more than 15 seconds. But Perlmutter notes that prison staff can never let their guard down. "Employees are trained to be watchful, and we lock our driver's license and other personal identifiers in our cars before entering the facility," she says. Perlmutter says she misplaced her keys once and immediately officers locked down the whole healthcare facility to search for them. "It's like having a SWAT team move into the facility. You feel protected and know you're being watched," she says.

Thanks to the continuing education associated with maintaining her credentials-RHIA, CPHQ (certified professional in healthcare quality), and CCHP (certified correctional health professional)-Perlmutter stays abreast of HIM issues and has numerous contacts in the field. And when she faces new challenges, Perlmutter tells herself to be patient and use these

resources. "It helps me fight feeling overwhelmed and just be methodical," she says. Still, she believes her job at the Central California Women's Facility is perfect for her. "Because of my interest in quality management, this position is absolutely ideal. It's the position I always wanted to have."

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