

More to Manage

Health information experts brace for a major shift in medical billing

WHEN HEALTH INFORMATION majors at UL Lafayette learn about a new medical code over the next couple of years, they will be taught by the best in the business.

Carol Venable, professor and head of the Health Information Management Department, and Anita Hazelwood, professor of health information management, have been studying the new identification system at the request of the American Health Information Management Association. They are “expert trainers,” according to the AHIMA. Only about 100 people in the United States have earned that designation.

A medical code is abbreviated information used by health care providers to describe services. “Codes are like shorthand or like a zip code,” Hazelwood explained. A physician’s diagnosis, for instance, has a predetermined code.

The United States has been using versions of the International Classification of Disease for the past 30 years. In 2009, the federal government enacted a law that requires health care providers to switch to an expanded ICD on Oct. 1, 2013.

“This will likely have as much of an impact on health care as the creation of Medicare and the enactment of the Health Insurance Portability and Accounting Act,” Hazelwood predicted in an interview this spring.

The current version, ICD-9, is composed of numbers. Letters were added to ICD-10. This extension will create a much more detailed database. There are about 10,000 codes in ICD-9; there will be about 68,000 codes in ICD-10.

“This will have a major impact on everyone in health care. This is going to affect anyone who files any kind of medical claim,” Hazelwood said.

The AHIMA asked Venable and Hazelwood in 2000 to learn about ICD-10



Carol Venable, left, and Anita Hazelwood

and help create an orientation guide for health care providers. Training manuals they have written are top sellers in the health information management field. Both have earned AHIMA Legacy Awards for their work.

In October, Venable and Hazelwood attended an intense three-day training session for ICD-10. They, in turn, will use their knowledge to train others. “Not just our students, but staff in doctors’ offices, hospitals and so on,” Venable said.

The faculty members have already started offering continuing education classes for people who handle billing for health care providers, such as physicians’ office managers.

ICD-10 will produce data that can be used for statistical purposes as well as billing for medical services. “So, reimbursement is important, but this information is also used in analysis by the Centers for Disease Control. The

CDC can look at trends in diseases,” Venable said.

She cited the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS, as an example. “Many years ago, it didn’t fit into any code. They designed a new code for it and over time, refined it, so that now we have a code that adequately describes that condition.”

Venable said the ability to collect more specific data will have far-reaching benefits.

“Several years ago, emergency room staff began treating injuries sustained in three-wheeler accidents. So, by assigning a code to that particular circumstance, we’ve collected that information across the entire United States. It gives you a tremendous amount of statistical information about trends and patterns that we wouldn’t otherwise have.”

Other countries have been using the expanded ICD for about 20 years. “Each country takes the umbrella document, issued by the World Health Organization, and produces its own version, but there’s really very little difference from one country to another,” Hazelwood said.

The professors said the switch to the expanded code in the United States is a “massive undertaking.”

“Adoption of the new system is going to be an expensive process,” Venable said. In addition to receiving extra training, health care providers must develop and modify their computer systems to accommodate new equipment and software.

Hazelwood teaches the coding system to UL Lafayette students each spring.

“I have a challenge, over the next two or three years, of teaching students the current system, while preparing them for the new system. There will be one class that will have to be fully versed in both,” she said. ■