

AHIMA's Advocacy Priorities for 2009

Save to myBoK

by **Dan Rode**, MBA, FHFMA

The media has been rife with stories on the changes to come from the incoming 111th Congress and the new presidential administration. Healthcare reform appears to be high on the agenda. However, the current state of the healthcare industry is a mix of great needs and great expectations, couched with the reality that the US is deeply immersed in two wars and an economic downturn.

It is into this turbulent environment that AHIMA will begin its advocacy for key HIM issues for 2009. This article looks ahead to what AHIMA hopes to achieve through its advocacy efforts in 2009. Next month AHIMA's director of government relations, Don Asmonga, MBA, will look back on what the association and the profession achieved during the 110th Congress and offer our expectations for the 111th Congress.

Health Information's Integral Role in Healthcare Reform

Healthcare reform was a hot topic during much of the 2008 elections. Reforming healthcare will require resolving a variety of issues, including how the US collects, stores, and uses its healthcare data.

While health information, per se, is not a player in the structure of our nation's healthcare delivery and payment systems, it will play a key role in our quest to improve healthcare quality and patient safety. It will also be integral in understanding the relationship between cost and healthcare services and technology and improving our population health and ability to survive incidents of public health outbreaks.

All of these issues fall under a blanket of ongoing privacy concerns that have plagued policy makers for several years.

Policy makers still need to be educated on just what the HIM profession does and who we are. This is a role each HIM professional, component state association, and AHIMA as a whole must take on if we are to have an impact on our nation's policy discussions. We have a lot of ground to cover given the significant change in leadership in the federal government occurring this month.

Our role is to not only define what the HIM profession is but what it is becoming as the healthcare industry transitions to an electronic environment. While HIM professionals are managing the transformation, it is important that policy makers understand how the HIM profession affects health information—its collection, use, analysis, and security.

It is paramount that AHIMA members and staff communicate to policy makers the connection between a health information issue and the HIM profession, so they understand the interest and expertise behind our recommendations.

HIM professionals will have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and advocacy prowess at this year's Capitol Hill Day on March 24. We hope you'll join us.

Standardization Work Continues

AHIMA's agenda for healthcare data standards remains significant and lengthy. ICD-10 conversion will remain a priority until the industry achieves full compliance with the ICD-10 codes and the HIPAA transaction updates.

However, we cannot stop with ICD-10. AHIMA continues to advocate for a national approach to, and coordination of, all terminologies and classifications, something absolutely necessary if we are to achieve interoperability. This is not an easy subject to discuss with policy makers, but it is necessary if the nation is to achieve its desired health IT goals.

Quality measurement and other uses of clinical information outside of the electronic health record (EHR) remain a significant issue, as highlighted in AHIMA's statement on data stewardship, released last month.

AHIMA will be actively involved with the public and government groups concerned with setting data standards, data sets, and the transactions that will convey such data. AHIMA's involvement in these issues includes participation in groups like the National Quality Forum, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, Health Level Seven, and the newly formed AHIC Successor, Inc.

We also must ensure that consumers, employers, and other public advocates understand the need for data uniformity, consistency, and the concept of collecting data once and using them in many different ways.

HIM professionals also play a role in today's data requirements for data collection and reporting associated with present on admission, never events, the Physician Quality Reporting Initiative, and pay-for-performance. In addition, AHIMA will advocate on issues related to the EHR, health information exchange, and the personal health record.

Again concepts of data uniformity, integrity, and security will be championed along with issues such as the legal EHR and the harmonization of standards to achieve actual functional processes that can actually encourage adoption and proper use of the standard EHR.

Privacy—The Perennial Issue

Confidentiality, privacy, and security are issues that do not—and should not—go away. They will be major issues this year, both nationally and in the states. AHIMA expects to see numerous attempts at both levels to deal with healthcare data breaches, identity theft, and health IT implementation that will challenge the industry and the government for confidentiality and security solutions.

AHIMA will educate policy makers and consumers on both the complexity of these issues as well as the ramifications of potential (and possibly damaging) actions that could result from misguided laws or regulations. At the same time we will offer solutions to address these problems and improve consumer confidence in our profession and the healthcare industry's ability to maximize quality healthcare while also maximizing data confidentiality and security.

Privacy issues have been a barrier to federal backing for development and implementation of EHRs and health information exchange. It is HIM's role to work with consumers and policy makers to ensure we can move forward, while not increasing privacy concerns for most.

Privacy is often thought of as a government issue. However, the key to success is educating employers and consumers on the value of uniform health data and securing such data, while expanding its proper use for quality, patient safety, research, reimbursement, and policy making—all key goals shared by consumers, government, and business.

As we address improvements in healthcare quality and efficacy, we must also address healthcare costs, which are now approaching 17 percent of the nation's gross national product. It is crucial that the public understands that health IT and the collection and use of data can improve healthcare quality and lower costs.

Otherwise, given the economy, we could see less funding for health IT and healthcare in general, which in turn will decrease the industry's desire to move forward into an electronic environment. The challenge in our healthcare organizations, our communities, and the nation will be great.

Work Force

Building the HIM work force has been an AHIMA focus for many years. We face the challenge of increasing the number of HIM professionals while the demand, functions, and need for HIM professionals change. At the same time, the profession is facing a significant number of retirements as baby boomers leave the work force, and our colleges and universities are faced with a limited number of trained HIM faculty and significant financial challenges.

These conditions serve as barriers to increasing the size and content of current HIM education programs and the number of academic programs at the graduate, bachelor's, and associate levels. Advocacy is required at both the federal and state levels.

We must inform policy makers and consumers on the importance of HIM and HIM programs, including increasing the number of trained faculty and attracting more students.

We have done a lot of groundwork, but now we must achieve active support and finances for academic programs (not to mention additional training for those already engaged in the profession) so that education can begin. Investment today will not produce graduates until several years into the future.

This year will see significant attempts to address the current state of the healthcare industry and improve its future. We must be ready to describe and facilitate this future. AHIMA looks forward to these challenges and welcomes the active participation of each member as we build a better future for our patients, industry, and profession.

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