

Mind-boggling Change

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by Christina Mayer Duggan

Mind-boggling. It's a word that comes from Debbie Fernandez's mouth time and again when she discusses the sheer volume of hospital correspondence, the transition from paper to electronic environments, and the dedication of her staff.

For nearly 20 years Fernandez, RHIA, has worked at New York Weill Cornell Medical Center, which, along with its sister site, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, makes up New York Presbyterian. All told, Fernandez has served as chart completion clerk, medical correspondence secretary, medical correspondence representative, and medical records coordinator before accepting her current position as operations manager in 2001.

So How Did It All Begin?

After graduating cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree in political science and philosophy from City University of New York's York College, Fernandez began exploring the healthcare arena. "I had a vague idea I wanted to help people in the healthcare setting," she says. In 1984 she accepted a position as chart completion clerk.

Soon, Fernandez discovered that the hospital offered medical terminology classes; she took three semesters. Then she discovered that Touro College in New York offered tuition-free HIM evening classes in a classroom at the hospital. Again Fernandez took advantage of the learning opportunity.

Initially coding interested her. Then the college's director explained HIM. "I decided to give it a shot," she says, "though at first, it didn't sound like medical records would be an exciting thing." But then Kathleen A. Frawley (JD, MS, RHIA), AHIMA member and Fernandez's teacher, spoke on patient confidentiality and privacy.

"I took two classes the first semester and loved it," she says. "It was intriguing . . . I was passionate about the confidentiality and legal aspects of medical record," she says, noting that the issues appealed to her interest in political science. "I felt I was a patient advocate, guiding them and helping them protect themselves. I have a role that safeguards patient privacy."

Fernandez took classes for four years, earning her RHIA certification in 1991.

But her biggest career challenge came in 1997, when the hospital went live with its document imaging system, transitioning from a manual world to an electronic one. Outpatient records went online first. Inpatient records followed in 1998; behavioral health records in 2003. All paper-based records were scanned into the system and indexed.

"We also had to reengineer our processes, revise workflows, and change people's roles and habits," she says. "People who did things the same way for 20-plus years had to be taught to do things differently, so there were challenges." Fernandez helped train staff in all shifts, some of whom were not computer savvy. "But it was a great transition—mind-boggling. Now you can get a full-blown medical record by just opening an application!" On average, the number of records currently maintained annually is approximately 90,000; about 400,000 pages are scanned and indexed monthly.

As operations manager, Fernandez oversees the 24/7 circulation unit, the 24/7 patient index area, and the behavioral health division. She supervises one coordinator and five supervisors, who in turn manage 42 full-time equivalents. She also oversees legal, medical, and behavioral-health correspondence—about 20,000 pieces of correspondence a year. "We've stopped pulling charts for correspondence," she says. "Now, we just go online—it saves time."

Fernandez also works with the circulation staff and is gradually phasing out chart distribution. "Once, we'd have 2,000 chart pulls a day; now it's under 100. That's huge."

Customer service is also a big part of Fernandez's job. "It's important how patients are treated and how you interact with patients," she says. "You help patients understand the rules and regulations; you use technology to serve the hospital's mission."

To stay current in her career, Fernandez attends AHIMA seminars and reads journals. She keeps up with key happenings at her hospital, and more importantly, she stays up to date on current events. "I watch CNN and learn about issues concerning technology, finances, the law. Issues like identity theft set the stage for HIPAA," she says. "Also, laws can dramatically affect patients and their records; so can diseases, like HIV. Damage can come through the inappropriate medical-record release. You have to be careful."

Looking beyond healthcare, Fernandez learns more about her role. "I look at my job through the larger context of the world. We're part of something larger."

—Christina Mayer Duggan

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