Developing Quality Standards for EMRs

By Carrie Bauman, MSA, RHIA

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Health information management (HIM) has long been associated with quality documentation and management of the legal medical record. However, as the business of records management becomes increasingly automated, quality indicators and performance standards must adjust to accurately represent these new business models.

As work is automated, some processes are eliminated while new tasks are now necessary. Let's take a closer look at what new processes have arisen from new technology and some thoughts on quality monitoring.

What Is Eliminated?

Let's start by identifying what stays and what goes. With a document imaging system, records will be online from virtually anywhere. They will be available all hours of the day and night, every single day of the year with a login sequence and a few mouse clicks. Although the old file room will continue to be active the first year after going live with an electronic system, many facilities find that the activity drops off dramatically between the third and fifth years, with most reporting less than five percent of all requests for paper after that point. Because filing and retrieval of paper records is virtually eliminated, so are the steps necessary to combine records, divide them into multiple volume records and the filing of loose material.

Introduction of New Steps

With a document imaging system, information created by various electronic systems throughout the enterprise will be electronically moved to the document imaging system. This is very efficient because no human intervention is needed; this information is automatically placed in the right patient's record every time. However, getting paper-based information, such as progress notes, into the system will require an HIM staff member to prepare the record for scanning, the actual scanning itself, indexing the record to the correct patient's chart and a quality checking process. Because none of these steps existed previously in the paper world, quality standards will need to be developed for each step along the way.

Go Live Case Study: Baptist Health in Little Rock, AR

Shortly after going live with document imaging, Cindy McLain, MBA, RHIA, director of patient access, HIM and System Coding for Baptist Health in Little Rock, AR, motivated her staff to optimal performance with a $5 per record premium to scan and index the initial "flood" of records into the system. By providing an incentive to the staff that was above and beyond their normal time and a half overtime wage, the HIM team was highly motivated to get as many records processed as they could to maximize their earnings during this special project. And, in maximizing their take home pay, the staff showed just how efficient and resourceful they could be.

According to McLain, the staff "blew away" the scanning and indexing productivity standard she had set for them prior to the incentive. In fact, some of the staff got quite creative, moving two scanners so they could feed records into both machines simultaneously.

When the initial rush was processed and quality checked, McLain congratulated the team for their efforts with some nice bonus checks. And, the productivity bar was raised much to the staff's chagrin. However, because they were the ones who creatively created the exceptional levels of productivity during the initial go live project, the acceptance of the new standard went fairly smoothly.

Factors Impacting Efficiency

Keep in mind that scanning functionality in your document imaging system may be different from another vendor's system used by a neighboring facility. So, be careful in using benchmarks set by colleagues using a different application. Even when comparing notes with other users of your same product, make sure you understand the reasons that some of their policies and procedures were created. Analyze how work flows similarly and differently when considering the conversion from paper to electronic as well as from one release of the application to another. You may get some great tips from user groups that can be recycled by your facility, while other ideas may not work so well.

Changes in functionality as document-imaging systems mature are also something that you will need to consider. Now that many document imaging systems have been around for more than 10 years, a couple of progressive releases of the software are likely to have been brought to market by most vendors. With each new release, the vendor will generally attempt to improve functionality based on feedback from new and prospective customers as well as market forces. Be sure you understand how the new release works before you migrate forward. The vendor's implementation staff and project manager are often great resources for best practices. Keep in mind that even small improvements in hourly performance can have a dramatic impact to your bottom line, particularly when viewed over an annual time horizon.

As more and more organizations deploy technology to manage their patient records, concepts of good information management will begin to transcend to the new media. And, solid productivity and quality indicators will help you efficiently manage digital information in its new forms.

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