

# advance

## for Health Information Professionals<sup>®</sup>

### RESOURCE CENTER

By Michelle Martin

## Finding the 'Right' Registrars

### NCRA should consider specialized credentials in addition to the CTR.

THE INCREASED NUMBER of cancer patients in the U.S. has led to an even greater need to study, chart and understand cancer incidences and treatment successes.

Going forward, we anticipate that state central registries will become more assertive in requiring health care facilities to maintain a current cancer registry for collection and reporting of persons with cancer. However, developing a cost effective and efficient cancer registry presents a number of challenges, including the identification and recruitment of the right certified tumor registrars (CTRs). Not only is this a short-supply profession, with only one-third of the number of CTRs required to meet the demand joining the registrar profession annually, but it's also true that not all CTRs are created equal.

Despite the perception among many hospital administrators that a credentialed cancer registrar is capable of doing any and all cancer registry work, the cancer registry profession is as varied as the coding field in its skill sets, job functions and regulatory requirements. Credentials are a necessary starting point, but they merely test knowledge rather than specific competencies.

For example, a cancer registrar who has only worked in a non-Commission on Cancer (CoC) approved facility, collecting data for state reporting, cannot immediately fill a position in a CoC-approved facility. The CoC requires additional coding guidelines, program standards, internal relationships and committee responsibilities.

To take this a step further, a cancer registrar who has only worked in a hospital or clinic environment cannot immediately fill a position in a state central registry and vice versa. State central cancer registries have very specific standards and requirements for data collection, analysis and reporting of statewide incidences of cancer.

These are but a few of the challenges of a single credential for the CTR. As the field progresses and the need for CTRs expands, so too does the need for a credentialed registrar to fill the oversight role necessary to manage a large cancer registry. This "CTR" would require advanced education, skills and experience in budgeting, personnel management, etc., while still having a highly developed knowledge of the principles and practices for abstracting, analysis, reporting and performance improvement.



### ADVANCING THE PROFESSION

The National Cancer Registrars Association (NCRA) has taken great steps in strengthening the certification requirements (see p. 10), but this only addresses part of the problem. Formal education can cover many aspects of the cancer registry world; however, there are no training programs that can cover all the standards of the numerous accreditation and standard setting agencies as well as measure a minimum level of competency.

Just as the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) identified the need for specialized credentials for the various coding functions, so too should the cancer registry field. AHIMA recognized the differences in training and skill set for the various coding functions. As a result, the organization created an effective model that has helped differentiate and elevate job functions, including:

- Certified Coding Associate (CCA)
- Certified Coding Specialist (CCS)
- Certified Coding Specialist—Physician-based (CCS-P)
- Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA)
- Registered Health Information Technician (RHIT)

In an effort to advance the professionalism and credibility of the cancer registry field, the NCRA can look at the AHIMA model and consider specialized credentials in addition to the CTR. Specialized credentials may lead to several positive outcomes:

- Enhancing the prestige of the various aspects of the cancer registry profession,
- Alleviating the staffing shortages plaguing the industry by allowing cancer registry professionals to specialize in areas of interest, and
- Enabling employers to know exactly what they are getting for their money.

Ultimately, everyone will benefit—including patients, hospitals and the registrars themselves. ■

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