

advance

for Health Information Professionals®

By Michelle Martin

RESOURCE CENTER

Managing a Hybrid System

On the road to EHRs, HIM professionals have the opportunity to play a pivotal role.

WITH THE HEALTH CARE industry moving toward electronic HIM, many facilities are taking a methodical approach to the transition to EHRs by slowly integrating electronic records with their paper systems.

Although this is a step in the right direction, the result is the creation of a hybrid situation in which the two systems must co-exist and be managed simultaneously. This approach is attractive to many facilities because a minimal amount of effort is needed to convert a patient record as he or she requests care.

However, the hybrid system does present several challenges.

Requirements and regulations regarding the way electronic records are handled, stored and shared are entirely different from those governing paper records. Thus, in a hybrid situation, HIM staff must adhere to two separate sets of rules to form one cohesive system.

While EHRs provide remote access and ease of retrieval and transfer of data, they also introduce new security issues. Patient data must be carefully safeguarded when stored and transferred in an electronic format. Storage of EHRs requires special security adaptations to comply with HIPAA and other regulations. IT systems must also be able to facilitate EHR storage and safeguard data. Just as paper data are susceptible to human error, electronic data can be lost due to power outages or system failures.

Retaining paper records as extra backup in the event the system fails is one option some facilities are using, but if space constraints exist, electronic backup is even more critical. If facilities choose to eliminate paper records, HIM staff must be mindful of state and federal regulations governing how long records must be kept.

Considerable legal fines can be imposed if spoliation of evidence, or the intentional destruction, mutilation, alteration or concealment of information, is discovered. To prevent this, HIM managers institute a policy for EHR revisions. When doing so, they should answer the following questions:

- Can information be removed from records?
- Does a tracking process exist to examine changes being made to EHRs?
- Is there a backup system in place in the event that original records are lost?

In the world of hybrid and electronic records, HIM staff must also understand how each type of record can and cannot be used in legal situations. As "custodians of the record," HIM professionals must determine what constitutes the legal health

record as well as which format is required in court. HIM staff may be called to testify in court on the authenticity of a patient record, hence the importance of tracking EHR changes.

GOING PAPERLESS

Scanning paper records one by one into an electronic system can be expensive in terms of staff resources. It requires a significant amount of time and may result in lost productivity as staff put off other duties to transfer patient information into the electronic system. To defray these costs, hiring temporary staff may be a viable option. A number of staffing firms offer experienced HIM professionals who can train staff on the new system while aiding in the scanning of records.

Although there are challenges and necessary investments, most health care facilities understand the inevitability and long-term advantages of electronic HIM. EHRs make patient information far more accessible, decrease diagnosis and treatment errors, lower complication rates and improve the continuity of care across health systems.

As facilities move forward with EHR implementation, proactive HIM departments will do the following in preparation:

- Define the EHR path by establishing a transition timeframe and identifying key milestones to successful implementation.
- Identify knowledge and tools required to prepare for and implement the process.
- Assume a leadership position in the organization and actively support the process.
- Assess attitudes of key groups about EHR and create an overall project plan for all stakeholders.
- Conduct a cost-benefit analysis and identify methods for tracking project successes and associated risks.
- Address conversion issues and any bridge technologies needed for the transition.
- Evaluate staff computer skills and develop training plans.
- Outline policies and procedures needed in the new environment.

Widespread EHR implementation is within sight. HIM professionals have the opportunity to be champions for EHRs and play a pivotal role in what has the potential to be a true advance in our country's health care system. ■

Michelle Martin is group vice president of Kforce Healthcare Staffing (www.kforce.com), a professional staffing firm providing contract and direct hire staffing for HIM departments. Contact Martin at mmartin@kforce.com.

—Sponsored by Kforce Healthcare Staffing