



EDUCATION

A Health Information Profession with a Long History

The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) is a professional membership organization of more than 54,000 health information management (HIM) professionals. Founded in 1928 to improve the quality of medical records, AHIMA remains committed to advancing the quality of health information in an electronic environment and to educate a critical workforce to achieve the goal stated by President Obama in February 2009 of electronic health records (EHRs) for all Americans by 2014. There are an estimated 75,000 educated and credentialed HIM specialists already engaged in managing health information and health records management in the US today at varied skill levels. The field is in a period of dynamic change as health care shifts from paper to electronic health records. HIM professionals work across all types of care settings including hospital and integrated delivery systems (about 60%), medical groups and other ambulatory services (12%), long term care and specialty care (5%) with many new positions with IT



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vendors and consulting services, pharmaceutical firms, insurance companies, colleges and universities, public health and various governmental agencies.

HIM professionals have skills and competencies in data management, information policy, information systems, and administrative and clinical work flow. HIM professionals manage operations that are essential to ensuring an accurate and complete health record and cost-effective information processing. In hospitals, HIM professionals are part of the team including the IT staff and clinical informatics that oversees electronic health records. HIM skills are also critical to the quality improvement and revenue cycle processes of healthcare, ensuring the availability of accurate data. The role of HIM in helping medical practices adopt EHRs is growing and will be an ideal skill set for EHR technical assistance.

The first baccalaureate degree program in "medical record science" was begun in 1934. Today there are over 280 college and university based academic programs in health information management accredited by the Commission on

Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM). They range in levels from associate, baccalaureate to master's degree programs with over 18,000 enrolled students (see <http://www.cahiim.org/directory/>). The programs are located in 45 states and Puerto Rico at regionally accredited colleges, and 41 of these programs deliver degrees in a fully distance education format. There is growth in the number of programs currently under development with over 30 programs in CAHIIM accreditation candidacy for 2010.

Recent funding opportunities by the US Department of Health and Human Services, under the 2009 HITECH Act, will provide financial assistance to institutions of higher education to establish or expand certificate level, non-degree programs of six months or less duration to train an additional, short-term, mobilized, skilled workforce to support the adoption of EHRs. Individuals who complete these programs may pursue future expanded career tracks in HIM and health informatics education programs.

But established and developing health information management education programs today have the curriculum in place to adapt to this changing electronic environment. AHIMA launched a Virtual Lab project in March 2006, with an Internet-

based software simulation lab and lesson repository. Developed with contributions from software partners, educators, and HIM professionals, it was created to provide a learning laboratory for use in colleges and universities offering degree programs in health information management. The lab consists of multiple healthcare information applications, allowing students hands-on practice in electronic systems, with a series of lessons and instructional material designed to illustrate key concepts and principles of the health IT workforce curriculum.

The availability of a skilled workforce that can facilitate the implementation and support of an electronic health record system is considered a rate-limiting factor to widespread deployment of EHR systems. There is a stated need for more skilled professionals to replenish retirees and bring new abilities to the expanding employment opportunities this "EHRs-for-all patients" initiative implies. But health information management professionals represent an established profession with a long history; academic programs are already in place and offer a unique and challenging career field.

Claire Dixon-Lee is Executive Director, CAHIIM. For more information, visit www.ahima.org or www.cahiim.org.

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