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E-health: A Discussion of New Work Settings

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Leslie: E-health is a recent addition to the vocabulary of our industry. E-health refers to transferring patient health information via the Internet or the electronic delivery of health care products or services. Organizations that transfer patient information electronically are becoming known as E-health organizations or companies.

Patty: As a potential work setting for health information management (HIM) professionals, E-health was barely on our radar screens two years ago. Today, they already offer HIM professionals exciting opportunities for using their knowledge and skills in new ways.

Leslie: Patty, you and I have been fortunate to be part of the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) E-health Task Force, which was initiated in the fourth quarter of 1999. This initiative was begun because of our profession's growing concern about confidentiality of personal health information on the Internet.

Patty: Last year the E-health Task Force developed and widely publicized 39 tenets for protecting privacy and quality of patient health information. It was a logical first step in addressing a major public need and in introducing the skills of our profession to the young E-health industry.

Leslie: In 2001, the task force's goal is to define the role of HIM in E-health organizations. This presents a significant challenge to our profession because E-health organizations offer a wide range of services in which patient information is managed via the Internet. They represent business-to-business E-health companies that offer electronic medical record (EMR) systems or traditional HIM support services such as transcription, coding or release of information using the Internet, as well as business-to-consumer organizations that offer consumers the opportunity to maintain their own health history on a Web site. Clearly, a great variety of E-health businesses need the competencies of HIM professionals to provide quality products and services to their clients.

Patty: While we still have much work to do in this area, I think it would be interesting to present an example of how one HIM professional has used her HIM background to make an important contribution to Care Communications Inc. in our E-business activities.

Leslie: Great idea! Let's interview Jennifer Velasco. Jennifer is a registered health information administrator (RHIA) and has the position of systems administrator.

Patty: Jennifer, would you tell us a little about how your knowledge and skills in HIM enable you to better serve clients in the role of systems administrator.

Jennifer: Of course I will. One of my first assignments as a systems administrator was to support product development for a special project being conducted for one of our research clients. The goal was to develop an electronic medical data collection tool to support the abstracting needs required by the researchers. My knowledge of the way that medical records are organized and my understanding of medical terminology and the meaning of the data elements were invaluable in my ability to interact with the client, which included a team of physicians and nurses who were experts in their field, but not in medical record documentation.

Leslie: Specifically, how did you apply your expertise in medical records to the project?

Jennifer: For one thing, I recommended that the electronic data collection tool be designed with tabs for each type of data that they wanted to collect. That way the tool would be structured in the same way that the records are usually organized, making retrieval of information more efficient for the abstractors. Unlike the clinicians, I was seeing how the tool would be used from the perspective of a medical record abstractor. The client really appreciated that kind of input and learned from it. On subsequent projects with members of the same research team, they submitted preliminary study designs in my recommended format.

Patty: Were there other ways in which your HIM knowledge was used?

Jennifer: Although awareness of patient confidentiality is well known to and adhered to by researchers, as an HIM professional my knowledge of consents for release of information has been helpful to several of our clients with regard to record retrieval. Completion of important national studies can be delayed significantly if patient authorization forms are not worded properly for each state in which records are being requested, or for each type of record being requested. As all HIM professionals know, laws vary from state-to-state, regarding release of information from mental health records or other diagnoses that are highly sensitive. Clients are not always as aware of the specific requirements.

Patty: Additionally, haven't you been instrumental in convincing clients that the records should be de-identified in the electronic database (i.e., using numeric identifiers instead of patient names)?

Jennifer: Yes, Patty. Also, it isn't hard to convince the research clients to use numeric identifiers. They like our obsession with privacy and security. It is one of the reasons that they choose an HIM company to do this important work.

Leslie: Jennifer, please tell us a little about your experience with electronic transfer of patient data.

Jennifer: Once again our emphasis has been on the security of patient data. We encrypt all data and use File Transfer Protocol (FTP) to send the databases to the client's secure, password protected Web site. I teach our clients how to use encryption software, and I educate them about the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), including why we must comply. I think that as HIM professionals, we must be big proponents of HIPAA and help our clients understand and meet those requirements.

Patty: How would you sum up your ability to do your job as a systems administrator in an E-health organization vs. your ability to do that same job if you only had an information technology background?

Jennifer: I think I bring a lot more to our clients because I can see each project from a broader perspective. I understand the industry, I know medical records and understand the nature of the data our clients are collecting. I know what data is available in patient records and how reliable that data is likely to be for the purposes of the study. My knowledge of medicine and medical terms helps me do technical audits that assure quality data. My commitment to patient confidentiality spurs me to suggest every way possible to safeguard patient privacy. Actually, the information technology part of my job, the use of encryption and FTP, is the easy

part to learn. My underlying HIM skill set took years to acquire and really enhances my value to our clients.

Leslie: Patty and I thank you for joining us. I think your experience demonstrates how HIM professionals can add value to E-health businesses. As E-health organizations increasingly enable consumers and providers to interact to improve communications and accessibility to important patient information, those organizations that provide customer service that educates consumers and providers and other users of patient data about the rigor needed to protect patient data, will be the ones that are most successful. HIM professionals will give E-health organizations a real competitive edge as this industry continues to evolve.

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