



Take Action to Educate and Expand the Health Information Management (HIM) Professional Workforce

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AHIMA's Position

AHIMA regards the adoption and maintenance of electronic health records (EHRs), personal health records (PHRs), and the formation and utilization of health information exchange (HIE) networks as imperative to lasting improvements in the overall standard of quality healthcare delivered in the United States. But achieving an effective electronic information infrastructure for healthcare delivery is more than a matter of technology deployment and growing the technology work force. Our future information infrastructure will indeed require technology, as well as staff who focus on information technology. But there is a distinct need for a qualified workforce focusing on the underlying **information management** issues that are critical to the effective application of technology to sound information management and documentation principles. HIM professionals possess the knowledge and skill sets to facilitate effective integration of technology in a way that meets care delivery needs as well as compliance, legal, public health, research, administrative, and policy needs.

The need for qualified HIM professionals to facilitate the transition, implementation, and ongoing management of health information systems that support the goals of a healthcare system focused on improved quality, safety, consumer empowerment, and cost-effectiveness of care is growing substantially. At the same time, however, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects the number of active HIM professionals will fall well below that necessary to accomplish this transformation, due to an aging workforce, coupled with an insufficient number of graduates and available HIM academic programs.

While the House of Representatives has twice passed legislation that would initiate investment in HIM education, the Senate has yet to act on such legislation. While this legislation is not a complete answer to long-term needs, Congressional action can move us forward toward that solution.

AHIMA calls upon leaders of the healthcare industry and federal and state governments to accept this challenge, and to support and fund the education necessary to ensure adequate numbers of HIM professionals are in place to provide access to accurate, complete health information in this transitional electronic environment.

Why AHIMA Supports the Position

- A major study by the Center for Health Workforce Studies at the University at Albany, State University of New York and funded by AHIMA's Foundation of Research and Education (FORE) resulted in a series of reports that concluded:
 - There are an insufficient number of certified professionals available to fill all the positions and roles requiring HIM competencies. Almost 75 percent of survey respondents indicated there are not enough qualified applicants to satisfy all the vacant HIM positions within their organization.

- Education is essential to adapting to HIM's changing role. The report concluded that education that improves the "understanding of both architecture and application" of technology will be essential.¹
- The US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics projects HIM jobs as one of the higher growth health occupations in America.² Each year the industry needs several thousand *new* HIM professionals to occupy new positions as well as existing ones left vacant by retirees and professionals leaving the field. Each year about 2,500 new graduates enter the HIM profession. The gap widens with each passing year; at the same time our needs for HIM expertise are dramatically increasing.
- AHIMA has created several initiatives focused on its membership in order to address this shortage. These include an advanced agenda for electronic health information management (e-HIM[®]); creation of a virtual educational laboratory that provides state-of-the-art training for college students and develops a framework for education that encompasses the new roles required by the electronic workplace.
- In 2005, AHIMA/FORE and the American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA) organized a summit to review, clarify, and develop initial strategies addressing workforce challenges related to EHRs and HIEs. Summit participants included a broad representation of industry stakeholders from academia, professional associations, provider organizations, business professionals, and the federal government. The group identified crucial factors for the success of the healthcare industry in a time of transition and made nine recommendations to the industry, academia, and government. These factors and recommendations are highlighted in the 2006 report "Building the Work Force for Health Information Transformation."³ AMIA and AHIMA are adhering to these recommendations, which include advocating for funding of HIM and informatics education.
- HIM education, like that of other allied health professions, is funded through Title VII of the Public Health Service Act. However, recent budget and appropriations for Title VII outside of medical and nursing professions have been either limited or zero. Meanwhile, the clamor for adopting improvements in patient safety, quality, research, and health information technology (HIT) increases across the country, echoing a demand that cannot be addressed by today's availability of teachers, students, and programs in HIM and informatics

Recommendations

AHIMA calls on decision makers in industry, government, and higher education to acknowledge the unique contribution of HIM professionals to EHR and HIE implementation and the need for an expanded HIM work force by:

- Funding the educational and academic needs of the profession that facilitate:
 - Recruitment, preparation, and retention of educators in the HIM field
 - Ongoing evolution of curriculum, including continued changes in HIM and informatics
 - Expansion of HIM programs for master's and doctorate-level education
 - Provision of loans and scholarships to students who enter the HIM field and to current practitioners who want to further their education to advance the transformation of the profession.
- Providing support for the continued education of HIM practitioners engaged in managing the healthcare industry's transition from a paper to electronic environment.
- Creating a specific occupational category for HIM professionals by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to permit ongoing tracking of national progress in solving this workforce shortage.

¹ AHIMA. "Data for Decisions: The HIM Workforce and Workplace." 2004. Available at www.ahima.org.

² Hecker, D. E. "Occupational Employment Projections to 2016." *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2007.

³ AHIMA and AMIA. "Building the Work Force for Health Information Transformation." Available at www.ahima.org.

- Funding research related to:
 - Best practices for HIM related to EHR implementation and management
 - Information quality assurance methodologies for HIE
 - The socioeconomic impact on providers, organizations, and consumers related to the use of health information through EHR technologies while identifying the issues that inhibit effective implementations.

The promise of EHRs, HIEs, quality, safety, and improved healthcare delivery, efficiency, and effectiveness will not be realized solely through purchasing hardware and software. Such an assumption fails to recognize the detail involved in planning, implementing, and integrating HIT into existing healthcare systems and regulations. It also fails to recognize the importance of managing information in a new environment of dispersed records and the increased need for management of data integrity, completeness, uniformity, security, confidentiality and analysis within an array of technologies, terminologies, and classifications. This is the role of today's HIM professional. Without an adequate HIM workforce, HIT adoption, implementation, and use will not achieve the return on investment and goals envisioned for the 21st century.

AHIMA is the premier association of health information management (HIM) professionals. AHIMA's 51,000 members are dedicated to the effective management of personal health information needed to deliver quality healthcare to the public. Founded in 1928 to improve the quality of medical records, AHIMA is committed to advancing the HIM profession in an increasingly electronic and global environment through leadership in advocacy, education, certification, and lifelong learning.

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