

## CONCERNING CODING



### The Next Best Thing to Winning the Lottery

#### ELECTRONIC CODING AND WHAT IT CAN MEAN TO YOUR COMPANY

By Cynthia M. Pittmon, CHBME

All of us dream of winning the lottery and imagine how we would spend our winnings. A few years ago, we implemented electronic coding within our billing office, and although it isn't exactly like winning the lottery, it has allowed us to determine how we might "spend our winnings" (or in our case, savings) in many areas of our office.

Six years ago I was introduced to electronic coding utilizing Natural Language Processing (NLP) and thought it might help us increase productivity. Never could I have imagined what computer-aided coding (CAC) could do for our business. Not long ago we typed insurance claims and used manual account ledger cards. Today, government entities mandate filing electronic claims.

Can you imagine downsizing your data entry and filing staff by 80%? Can you imagine not feeling forced to outsource to India to control your costs? Can you imagine saving at least 10% of your annual budget? Can you imagine your coders having instant access to carrier coding guidelines?

Increasingly complex changes in the healthcare industry require specific coding knowledge that is very difficult for coders to understand and recall. Reporting requirements, such as the Correct Coding Initiative (CCI) and payor-specific guidelines, must be applied to each report and leave little tolerance for coding errors. The need to apply these rules and requirements to each report convinced us that we must pursue electronic coding.

Our initial investigations into CAC confirmed our expected productivity savings as well as compliance capabilities and opened the door to improvements in other areas of our office. With NLP-assisted coding, medical reports are received electronically, processed by our vendor, reviewed and approved by our certified coders, uploaded through a charge-capture module, and entered

electronically into our billing system. Our initial assessment of this paperless process indicated savings in the following areas:

- Increased coding productivity
- Reduced courier fees
- Elimination of clerical staff to sort papers
- Significant reduction of data entry staff
- Elimination of filing and retrieval of paper reports

The implementation costs were negligible and we found these additional savings and improvements:

- Strengthened skills of our coders
- Further development our auditing capabilities
- Improved quality and consistency of our coding
- Decreased days in Accounts Receivable
- Optimized appropriate reimbursements
- Reduced capital costs
- Improved coding training
- Improved productivity of other staff due to accuracy of coding
- Reduced appeals and re-processing of claims

Part of our implementation process involved assuring our coding staff that they were not being replaced, but would simply be aided in performing their jobs. Our coders now agree. With the tools available at their fingertips, they soon became quality control experts.

NLP-assisted coding has become a key component in allowing our coders online access to Local Carrier Determinations (LCD's) and other references they may need during a coding session. While reviewing a coded report for approval, they can simply click on a term and a pop-up window appears, giving them the reference they need to ensure that coding is accurate, complete, and compliant.

We can now allow our coders to work remotely. Their productivity is easily measured within our vendor's program

and has increased 50% since implementation. The coders love working electronically and believe that the system improves every aspect of their job.

Our vendor audits 20% of the reports being coded and advises us of any discrepancies that need reviewing.

With electronic processing we can file a claim in as little as 24 to 48 hours after the service is performed and we receive carrier payment for the service in as little as 10 days. This streamlined process has dramatically reduced lost charges, optimized appropriate reimbursements, improved operational efficiency, and improved employee satisfaction.

The greatest savings are in workflow management. Electronic reports eliminated the need for one full-time clerical staff member. Electronic charge capture from the approved reports reduced our data entry department by 75% (five FTE's). These five staff members were moved from manual data entry to account follow up.

If you decide to pursue electronic coding, be sure that you have a knowledgeable, experienced programmer either in-house or contracted; choose your electronic coding partner carefully; and have an adequate billing software system that can accept electronic charges. You will need to develop a transition team to look at all areas of implementation to determine staffing needs and to assist with working through the charge-capture process.

Implementation of an electronic coding solution prepared our company to meet the daily challenges we face. While we haven't won the lottery, seeing empty shelves, happy productive employees, increased client revenues, and improved financials is pretty exciting! ▲

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