



## Physician's Forecast

### How ICD-10 implementation will impact coders in doctors' offices

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By Rob Senior

For some time now, the date Oct. 1, 2013, has been ominously marked on the calendars of coders across the country. That date marks the inception of ICD-10, a new means of coding diseases, symptoms and causes of diseases as classified by the World Health Organization. Preliminary indications are that ICD-10 will almost double the number of available codes used in the current system, ICD-9.

Coders working in physician's offices have been apprehensive about the changes for some time. They fear that the superbills to which they have become accustomed will be rendered unrecognizable and that it will take years to re-acclimate themselves.

Leatrice Ford, RN, CCS, is CEO of ConsultCare Partners in Louisville, KY. She has given numerous presentations over the past few years, easing the concerns of physician's coders nationwide.

"Coders in physician's practices like to keep a list of the most frequently used diagnosis codes in their practice," Ford explained. "I think this is going to be the biggest change with ICD-10."

Ford added that in her job, she sees countless superbills and the common theme is a list of top diagnosis codes in the practice. The implementation of ICD-10, obviously, will require a re-write of those codes—a task that seems daunting to many, but Ford cautioned against unnecessary panic.

"People tend to believe this transition will be 'one to many'-meaning going from one ICD-9 code to many ICD-10 codes," she explained. "That can be very true, but I also learned that in some cases it may be the reverse."

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The general fear is that the number of choices will grow exponentially, causing confusion and the need for much greater detail in coding. At first glance, those fears appear well-founded, as ICD-10 is anticipated to house more than 12,500 codes as opposed to the just under 7,000 possible codes in ICD-9. But Ford says the impact of the new system will vary according to each practice's standards and way of business.

"If [the practice] hasn't really been actively coding—meaning seeing the diagnosis, and determining the proper codes off the physician's writing—then yes, ICD-10 has the potential to be a little tricky," she admitted.

Some people have suggested the solution is simple—have physicians add more specificity to their diagnoses. Again, though, this suggestion must be taken on a case-by-case basis. Coding in ICD-10 will be possible without detailed documentation, but the code will be very generic. "Just as in ICD-9, you still have the option of that non-descript code that catches a lot of diagnoses," Ford said.

Ultimately, it's undeniable that ICD-10 will change a number of things about the way business is conducted in physicians' offices. "Some of their systems will have to be changed out," cautioned Ford. "I'm sure most practices are already working on [updating the systems]—but if they haven't started working with their vendor yet, it's past time to start."

#### Crosswalk

Luckily for coders, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) is well aware of the magnitude of this change. As such, they've created a "crosswalk" to help coders practice and develop their ICD-10 coding skills, Ford explained.

"It's on the CMS Web site," she said, "but it takes some work. You need someone who knows how to access the program, marry it with descriptions... in and of itself, it isn't quite as easy to use as I'd hoped."

Nonetheless, the crosswalk is up and available. Though the tools themselves may be a bit raw at the moment, there's plenty of time—it's almost 4 years until ICD-10 goes live, and even once that happens CMS plans to keep the crosswalk available for an additional 3 years—a resource physicians' coders will no doubt find invaluable.

"If you picked up an ICD-10 code book—that thing is massive," said Ford. It's overwhelming from the standpoint of knowing where to begin. On the other hand, this crosswalk can ease the process for a practice."

Moreover, the crosswalk can also help a practice to determine the biggest answer with ICD-10—how drastically does the changeover figure to impact their specific business? Ford and other experts agree—the impact of ICD-10 will be far-reaching, but also vary greatly from practice to practice.

"This will help you to say 'Wow, this will be a huge change for us' or on the other hand, 'This is not as big a deal as we thought it would be,'" Ford concluded.

*Rob Senior is a managing editor at ADVANCE.*

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