

Don't Get Caught in the ICD-10 Storm

By George Eleftheriades

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It seems that one can't open a medical journal today without being reminded that ICD-10 is coming. And, the tenor of the articles seems very much like a warning rather than a reminder, suggesting the reader batten down the hatches now so as to not be caught up in the storm.

Yes, there will be an explosion in the number of codes from 17,000 to approximately 150,000, but nobody seems to be talking about the fact that the ICD-10-CM codes, which are used by outpatient physicians and providers, will expand to fewer than 70,000 codes (the balance will be used for inpatient services in hospitals and clinics). Further, while the absolute number of codes will balloon, only a small fraction of those codes will apply to any one specialty area.

This is certainly not to imply that transitioning to ICD-10 will be accomplished within a day. It won't. But, when all is said and done, all of the ICD-10 warnings will probably not amount to the significant hardships that are being touted -- as long as healthcare providers plan for it now.

Let's consider the positives.

- The expanded specificity and detail in diagnostic codes will have benefits for providers, who will likely now be more fairly compensated based on specific diagnoses.
- ICD-10 will likely result in better patient care as more detailed conditions will be better documented and able to be shared in the emerging electronic records space.
- Greater specificity will lead to greater efficiency in claims processing, likely curtailing manual reviews and claims that await further clarification.
- ICD-10 will likely help providers understand payer behavior on a code-by-code basis, which can be revenue critical.

Like any new technology, there are bound to be some bumps in the road. The key is planning for those bumps now. So, here are five ways to plan for the transition.

- **Become familiar with ICD-10 now.** This is no time to say, "I'll get there eventually." The more you understand the classification system and its intended use, the easier it will be to adapt current practices to accommodate it.
- **Create a project plan.** Oct. 1, 2013 sounds far away, but it really isn't -- not when you consider the technologies, training, compliance timelines and operational changes that ICD-10 will bring. Plan backwards so you are ahead of the curve, rather than waiting until the last minute and trying to catch up.
- **Review your current technology to determine what, if any, upgrades will be required to accommodate ICD-10.** From your EDI/claim submission tools to your practice management system, now is the time to identify if ICD-10 will necessitate a new system, a system upgrade or nothing at all. Don't wait until your staff is in the position of having to learn a new practice management system and a new coding system simultaneously. The sooner they are trained on the new system, the easier it will be to focus on new coding.
- **Build an ICD-9 to ICD-10 "hot list" of your most popular codes.** For most practices, the shift from ICD-9 to ICD-10 will involve a few hundred codes; not tens of thousands. Knowing what the code equivalents will be can make the transition easier for you, and for those doing the coding.
- **Engage business and trading partners for ICD-10 assistance.** Every one of your business and trading partners will be impacted by ICD-10. Your practice management provider will need to help you accommodate the shift, as will your electronic claims clearinghouse, billing service specialists and the payers with whom you are associated. So use them. Make sure they share with you what they are doing to be prepared for 2013 and when their modifications will be available to you. Find out what kind of training they will be providing for you and your staff. And then, when you know enough, rethink whether or not they are as up to speed as you'll need them to be.

The keys to a successful transition to ICD-10 will all come down to planning and training; the latter being perhaps the most critical component. Because, when all is said and done, those responsible for implementing the shift will need to be trained properly on the shift. The better prepared they are, the easier the shift will be.

So, get a plan, engage your EDI resources and take a deep breath. It's always darkest before the storm.

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