The Way of the Future with Computer Assisted Coding

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 The healthcare industry is constantly changing and finding areas to improve in. From new research, diagnoses, better cures or new cures, to health coverage changes, to better developed technology, something is always changing and improving. Medical coding is an area that is always trying to improve as well. “Traditionally such coding is performed by people called coders, but the shift toward [technology-driven healthcare](http://searchhealthit.techtarget.com/definition/Health-IT-information-technology) has increased the necessity and demand for medical coding systems -- especially with the growth in [electronic health record](http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/electronic-health-record-EHR) implementation and the transition to ICD-10-CM” (M. Rouse, 2015). Since the beginning medical coders have always been and always will be the important piece to the medical billing puzzle. From reviewing charts, to analyzing data, to accurately coding and billing records, they have always been a critical asset to the medical billing and coding area. Medical coding is valuable and always in demand. It can be a stressful and complicated task, which is why computer assisted coding (CAC) was designed specifically to change the medical coding world and to continue towards technology-driven healthcare.

 CAC has become very popular and well known since the introduction of ICD 10 in the medical coding field a few years ago. Computer assisted coding is a type of software that was created to make medical coding easier and less strenuous. It is capable of taking in the information from a clinical document and determining the necessary codes needed for the logged data. The system is specifically designed to go through the medical record and supporting documents, analyzing the documentation looking for medical terms and phrases that may require coding. It then determines if the identified phrase requires a medical code described by the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10).

 When CAC was first introduced to the healthcare industry, many healthcare information management professionals, doctors, and additional medical staff were hesitant. With every new technology or system, new policy or any change in healthcare, comes more work, more time needed, more studying, more stress, and more risk of complications until all of the kinks are worked out. Many professionals were worried that the software would replace medical coding staff members and other positions that are connected to medical coding. Some were worried the software would not work or would cause bigger issues such as system crashes and loss of completed work. When working in the healthcare industry, you quickly learn that you have to constantly have flexibility and openness to change. There is always something new occurring in the field.

With every new diagnosis, procedure, cure, or drug, comes new material for medical coders and other healthcare professionals to learn. Learning is a daily task for medical coders as well as staying current with their medical coding certifications. Sometimes coders do not have enough time in the day or even in the week to code the medical records, work with the doctors on missing or incorrect information, and also studying new codes or procedures that have become available. This is where the computer assistance coding system comes into play.

 For an experienced medical coder, they will be quick to learn all of the advantages of having the ability to use the CAC. The CAC will definitely come in handy for any diagnoses that are new, more complexed, tricky, or just hard to code. This means that the medical coder will be able to code the records quicker. This is going to reduce the amount of time it takes a coder to read through the documentation, determine the codes needed, determine if they need to query the doctor, and determine if they have all of the information required to complete the coding process. This is something that is very appealing to HIT professionals because it is going to give the coder(s) more time to focus on getting more done.

Productivity will essentially increase with the computer assisted coding because of the amount of time being spent on each record will be reduced dramatically. Productivity is very important in the coding world because there are so many records that have to be reviewed, coded, and billed on a daily basis. There are times when coders aren’t sure of what the code should be so the CAC will help narrow down the options and guide the coder to the appropriate code or section where the code may be found. There are thousands of codes, so eventually even the best coders will get stumped.

 Medical Coders also have to make sure they are following the guidelines, rules, and policies of the facility, the health insurances, HIPAA, and so many other areas. There are so many factors that professionals have to take into consideration when they have a position in medical coding. “Healthcare organizations are now able to streamline revenue cycling processes due to CAC while becoming increasingly more compliant with the requirements of payer and quality reporting” (EHRScope, 2012). It is very important for facilities to stay compliant so having the coding assistant system readily available will help ensure coders are doing so. The CAC will also help the medical coder and facility improve on their accuracy when it comes to coding claims. It is always important for the medical coders to code the records correctly the first time. Which in return, will decrease the number of denials being received and the extra time it takes to process and resubmit the corrected claims. It becomes a vicious cycle at times and the computer assisted coding system will help change the cycle.

 The CAC was designed to be a helpful guide for coders as well as to help relieve some of the stress that can come with many different coding scenarios. The whole thought behind the system was for it to be a vital assistant and asset to a healthcare company. While there are so many advantages that can be named about having the CAC software, there are still disadvantages to the system. Like any other new system, software, method, or routine, there will have to be multiple tests, trials, and reviews done before giving the medical coders and office professionals the go ahead.

Healthcare organizations, providers, and healthcare information management professionals must remember that this software system is just a guide or extra tool to use in the process of coding. The computer assisted coding system does cost money for an organization to use so it is important that the coders and staff train to learn the system and to not rely 100% on this tool. Like all other systems, there will be times where the CAC gets it wrong or fails. Coders still need to be continuously knowledgeable and alert. “Coders must still be aware of when an ICD-10 code properly matches a diagnosis and when it doesn’t, so they can provide an accurate safety net if the computer gets it wrong” (J. Bresnick, 2013).

Mistakes happen. Software systems often make mistakes. A software program is unable to thoroughly review the details of the records to determine if certain diagnoses are missing or if the patient could be suffering from other illnesses not listed. Whether it is selecting the wrong code, missing undocumented diagnoses, or not being able to critically think like a human brain, mistakes are going to happen. It is important to know that the medical coders will be able to rely on this system for assistance, but at the same time be on their toes for any error that may come.

Newer medical coders will not be able to rely on the CAC as much as an advanced medical coder would. Newer medical coders will take a little more time to get used to the system, while still getting used to learning how to accurately code records. They will require training, job shadowing, and proof of accurately coding as well as being able to identify errors without supervision before they will be able to work independently with the system and coding.

Reports from the software should be run on a frequent basis so that staff can monitor and review what is going on with it. This ensures the performance is functioning accurately and also to keep up on performance improvement. Like any new system or software, there should be multiple tests, trials, and reviews conducted before allowing coders to use the tool confidently. “We are now editors, data analysis experts, validators and facilitators to ensure that not only are we doing our jobs, but that the technology is accurately doing its job as well” (AXEA Solutions, 2016)

There will always be pros and cons to each software and technology that comes into the healthcare world. The idea behind the computer assisted coding was well thought out and on point. It was designed to take on the most tedious task of medical coding. It is an important tool that is setup to help take some of the stress off of the medical coding process. Coding medical documents can take an extreme amount of time, knowledge, and energy. The CAC can bring more positive than negatives if used wisely, responsibly, and cautiously. As time continues on, the computer assisted coding system will become more advanced with less flaws. When it comes down to it, the CAC has been a great addition to the healthcare industry and a giant step into the future.

References

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