



## **Challenges and Opportunities for the Medical Transcription Sector**

New technologies and growing economic pressures have created major challenges for the medical transcription sector in recent years. In the face of these challenges, medical transcription service organizations (MTSOs) and healthcare documentation professionals have remained steadfastly committed to ensuring the accuracy, consistency, and security of patient health records. Furthermore, they have developed and adopted new technologies for health data capture, formatting, and secure transfer as a means of uniquely contributing to the evolution of the clinical documentation industry. By doing so, they have positioned themselves to serve as an accelerator of electronic health record (EHR) adoption, as envisioned by the recently enacted Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH Act). However, economic pressures have made it difficult for MTSOs to either acquire new enabling technologies or to invest in innovating or developing technologies. They likewise have been challenged with developing the workforce necessary to fully meet the quickly evolving clinical documentation needs of physicians and healthcare enterprises. By supporting the sector in the areas of technology acquisition and workforce development, the federal government will be making a wise investment in the country's health information system, one which will pay dividends in the form of improved EHR adoption and much-needed job creation.

New technologies, including EHR systems, data exchange platforms, speech recognition systems, and natural language processing engines to tag and abstract pertinent clinical information offer an increasingly broad range of ways to capture patient health information and allow that information to be shared more efficiently and securely than ever before. An increasingly competitive market in clinical documentation services has resulted in a commoditization of services, which has forced MTSOs to compete heavily on price rather than the inherent value clinical information provides to patient care delivery, leading to razor-thin profit margins and limited resources to further innovate for the sector. Declining revenues have prevented a reinvestment in technology and human capital, which has in turn stifled the ability of the sector to meet the rapidly changing clinical documentation needs of physicians and healthcare enterprises.

Regardless of the means by which patient health records are created, need for the data analysis and quality assurance services of healthcare documentation professionals will only continue to grow as patient health information is increasingly exchanged across providers and enterprises. Health data that is captured without quality assurance measures will inevitably result in patient data errors that are perpetuated in the record, thereby potentially compromising continuity of care, clinical decision-making, and reimbursement.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being a proven and highly effective way to ensure the quality of patient health information, the dictation-transcription process has historically been and continues to be the documentation method of choice for physicians because it produces a comprehensive, specific narrative that allows for the accurate capture of patient history as well as the care encounter. Government funding for technology acquisition and workforce development will enhance the ability of MTSOs to fulfill the documentation support needs of physicians in the age of EHRs. This will increase physician productivity, allowing them to focus on better patient care and assist them with a smoother operational transition to EHRs.

New job creation is an essential component of the HITECH Act. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of medical transcriptionists is projected to grow 14 percent from 2006 to 2016, faster than average for all occupations.<sup>2</sup> Demand for medical transcription services will grow as the result of an aging population and individuals living longer with chronic diseases. These populations receive proportionately greater numbers of medical tests, treatments, and procedures that require documentation. In addition, healthcare documentation professionals will become increasingly essential to the well being of the healthcare system as physicians become more reliant upon accurate and complete clinical information in the EHR for clinical decision making. Workforce development funding will help meet this demand, as well as boost job creation at a time of record unemployment.

While technology rapidly changes, the need for accurate, complete, and consistent patient health information remains constant. MTSOs and healthcare documentation professionals have long filled that need and, with expanded opportunities for technology acquisition and workforce development, will be well positioned to do so far into the future. By properly integrating people and technology, the medical transcription sector believes it is possible to fulfill the promise and potential of EHRs to improve the quality of the American health care system.

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<sup>1</sup> Association for Healthcare Documentation Integrity and Medical Transcription Industry Association, *Improving the Accuracy of Patient Narrative Notes: The Role of Documentation Specialists in Supporting Physician Use of EMRs*, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2008-09 Edition.