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Striking a balance: The role of medical coders in the age of automation

by Kellye Reers, Deputy General Manager for Coding Solutions

Decision-makers at healthcare organizations are seeking to speed up processes, improve efficiency and reduce costs. Revenue cycle management (RCM) is one area of particular interest, especially the manual coding process. About 60 percent of healthcare organization leaders noted that if they didn't already use autonomous coding, they plan to within the next six to 12 months.[1]

Technology investment offers a tempting, and sometimes fruitful, path toward that goal. However, the real key to better RCM processes, especially in medical coding, is to balance that technology with your medical coders.

Where's the line between the benefits of technology and the skills medical coders bring to the table? How can an organization create more efficient processes and make the best use of their skilled workers? Striking the right balance in these areas can create efficiency and ensure accuracy beyond what technology could do on its own.

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1   https://www.techtarget.com/revcyclemanagement/
    news/366600260/How-Do-Healthcare-Organizations-
    Feel-About-Autonomous-Coding

What to consider before implementing autonomous coding technology

Many facilities are using computer-assisted coding (CAC) software but looking to automate the coding process even further. CAC is often thought to increase productivity because it automates the documentation review process and provides code suggestions, but a coder must still validate and confirm the appropriate codes.

Where CAC makes suggestions that must be human-verified, autonomous coding has the potential to improve efficiency and change the job role for skilled coders by eliminating more of the manual process. It could also decrease costs in the long run.

As organizations begin to evaluate potential technology solutions, it's critical to start small. Beginning the autonomous coding journey with less complex outpatient accounts would be a good place to start because you'll need to develop a strong quality assurance process. This will ensure the technology is accurately coding these accounts.

For now, the biggest challenges for implementing new medical coding technology are coding accuracy, technology's ability to autocode more complex visits like outpatient surgeries and inpatient stays, keeping compliance at the forefront and determining how coder roles will evolve with the addition of technology.

Ensuring coding accuracy

Coding is a highly detail-oriented part of the RCM cycle. There are thousands of coding rules that must be applied appropriately, which means adding new technology to the mix can create the risk of error.
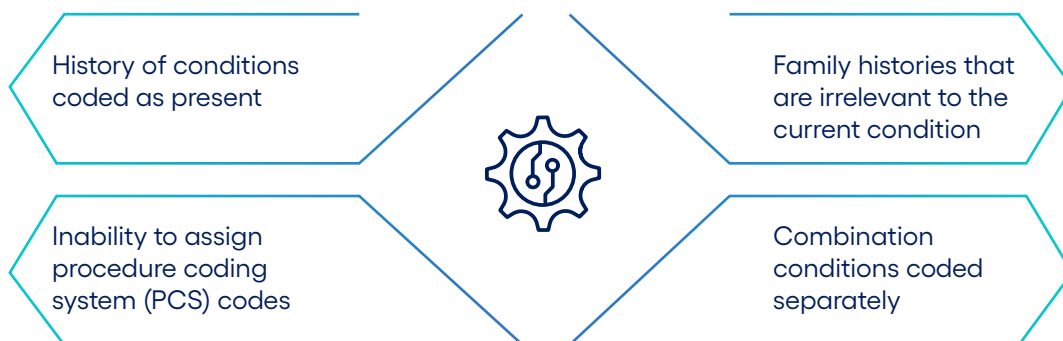
The accuracy challenge is twofold:

- First, is the data within the patient chart complete and appropriately documented to be able to code the chart correctly?
- And second, can the technology correctly capture the information? Even when the technology works correctly, it could still produce errors if the original chart isn't documented appropriately.

Human/automation balance suggestion:

Upskill your coding team to validate whether the technology is pulling the correct data. Common areas where technology may produce errors include:

History of conditions coded as present

Family histories that are irrelevant to the current condition

Inability to assign procedure coding system (PCS) codes

Combination conditions coded separately

When you have accurate documentation to draw from, your people and technology will work much better together.

Starting with less complex coding

Inpatient coding can be one of the most complex patient types for coders, however, outpatient surgeries, observations and even complex emergency visits can be challenging as well. There's an abundance of documentation to review, which would make it easy for autonomous coding to miss something and make mistakes, which is why coders are still essential to this process.

Human/automation balance suggestion: Start small. Forward-thinking organizations interested in adding additional technology to their processes are starting with less complex outpatient diagnostic visits and professional physician-based accounts.

Keeping compliance at the forefront

Accurate coding is essential for minimizing compliance risks and ensuring proper reimbursement. Automation can significantly enhance the coding process, but it's crucial to maintain high quality standards.

By combining automation with human oversight, you can achieve a balance that maximizes efficiency while maintaining accuracy and compliance.
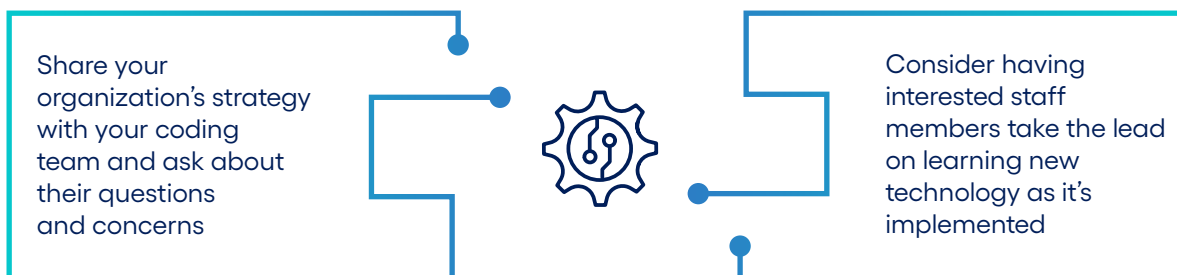
Human/automation balance suggestion: Have coders and auditors perform quality checks on the technology platform. This approach helps prevent denials, ensures accurate reimbursement and reporting, and ultimately contributes to improved patient care.

Evolving coder roles

It's challenging—and expensive—to find skilled coders to add to your team. Despite the cost, highly trained staff members are necessary to every healthcare organization. Technology can't fully replace the people doing this skilled work.

Autonomous coding could potentially create a win-win situation for staffing challenges by allowing organizations to hire fewer staff members but create more opportunities for existing staff to learn and grow their careers.

Human/automation balance suggestion: Evaluate existing skill sets and have open conversations with your team about future technology plans. Emphasize that human workers are still your most valuable resource.

Share your organization's strategy with your coding team and ask about their questions and concerns

Consider having interested staff members take the lead on learning new technology as it's implemented

Fully autonomous coding would change the roles of coders, but we're far from being able to rely solely on the technology. Creating a balance between the skilled human coders and emerging technologies is critical to ensuring the most effective and efficient RCM processes, especially in complex settings.

As technology continues to change, coders will need to adapt; however, the human touch isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Questions about automation or skilled coders for your facility? Contact physiciansales@cognizant.com.

cognizant

World Headquarters

300 Frank W. Burr Blvd.
Suite 36, 6th Floor
Teaneck, NJ 07666 USA
Phone: +1 201 801 0233
Fax: +1 201 801 0243
Toll Free: +1 888 937 3277

European Headquarters

280 Bishopsgate
London
EC2M 4RB
England
Tel: +44 (01) 020 7297 7600

India Operations Headquarters

5/535, Okkiam Thoraipakkam,
Old Mahabalipuram Road,
Chennai 600 096 India
Tel: 1-800-208-6999
Fax: +91 (01) 44 4209 6060

APAC Headquarters

1 Fusionopolis Link,
Level 5 NEXUS@One-North,
North Tower, Singapore 138542
Phone: + 65 6812 4000

WF 3303350