

Insurance Coding Specialist

Job Description:

Insurance Coding Specialists take data from patient medical records and assign numeric codes based on these factors. Every symptom, disease, diagnosis, treatment, and surgical procedure has a code assigned to it. Most medical expenses today are paid for by insurance companies or the government through Medicare. The amount that is paid to health care providers is based on many factors, such as the problem being treated (the diagnosis), the procedures done, and the supplies and equipment used. Codes standardize billing and payments. They also provide an efficient way to collect and organize health statistics that facilities need to plan and manage their services and that the government uses to identify health care concerns.

Coding specialists primarily use two major coding systems: the ICD-9-CM classifies diagnoses and the CPT classifies procedures. The numbers used in coding are contained in manuals that the specialists consult. Coding specialists must use judgment when choosing the correct code to assign. For example, when a patient sees the doctor, the visit is coded according to how much time the doctor spends with the patient, the diagnosis, and the complexity of the problem presented. Care must be taken to code correctly so that the health care provider can bill enough to cover the cost of the service. At the same time, the level of coding cannot be higher than the complexity or length of service or this may be considered fraud. Another system of classification is called the diagnosis-related group or DRG. Patients are assigned to the group that corresponds to their diagnosis and this determines how much Medicare and insurance companies will reimburse (pay) for health care services.

In order to read medical records correctly and use coding manuals properly, coding specialists must have knowledge of medical terminology, disease processes, and pharmacology.

Coding specialists work in hospitals, medical centers, group medical practices, clinics, and health maintenance organizations (HMOs).

Duties and Responsibilities:

- Extract data from patient medical records.
- Use coding manuals and/or software to assign codes to symptoms, procedures, and other data taken from medical records.
- Use DRG groupings to assign patients to diagnosis-related groups.
- Review work for accuracy.
- Generate reports.

Personal Qualities:

Coding specialists must be able to work very accurately and must pay attention to detail.

Physical Requirements:

Work as a coding specialist is not physically demanding, but sitting for long periods at the computer can be tiring for some people and can result in back, neck, and eye strain. Repetitive motion injuries of the wrist, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, are also a risk.

Educational Requirements:

The training for coding specialists ranges from self-study and short-term certificate programs to two-year associate degree programs in health information management. Individuals who earn degrees can perform

other medical record duties in addition to coding. Coding students study anatomy, medical terminology, using the CPT and ICD-9-CM manuals, and coding issues related to the various body systems.

Certification Requirements:

Certification is voluntary, but because of the importance of accurate coding, the demonstration of competence through certification is an advantage when seeking employment. The American Academy of Procedural Coders offers the Certified Professional Coder (CPC) and the Certified Professional Coder - Hospital (CPC-H) designations to individuals who have two years of coding experience and who pass examinations administered by the Academy. The American Health Information Management Association awards three certifications: Certified Coding Associate (CCA) for new coders, Certified Coding Specialist (CCS) for experienced hospital-based coders, and Certified Coding Specialist-Physician-based (CCS-P) for experienced coders in physician-based settings. Certifications can be earned by passing proficiency examinations.

Projected Outlook for this Career:

The projected employment outlook for coding specialists is excellent because of the increasing need for complete and accurate medical records and to meet the requirements of insurance companies and Medicare.

Salary Information:

In 2002, the average annual salary for a certified coding specialist was \$38,061. Non-certified coders earned an average annual income of \$32,145.

Career Ladders:

Coding specialists can earn more as they increase their competency and their ability to code in a variety of health care settings. With additional education, they can become health information technicians and administrators.

To Learn More and Prepare:

- Obtain information from the American Academy of Professional Coders and the American Health Information Management Association.
- Explore the Web Links provided in this profile.
- Review professional journals such as the Journal of AHIMA and The E-Coding News which is available on the Web site of JustCoding.com.
- Conduct an informational interview or job shadow a coding specialist to learn more about the duties performed.
- Obtain employment or a volunteer position in a health care facility.
- In high school, take courses in computer skills, office procedures, mathematics, biology, and English.
- Investigate various study programs to see which type best fits your needs.

Professional Organizations:

American Academy of Professional Coders
309 West 700 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84101
(800) 626-2633
<http://www.aapc.com>

American Health Information Management Association
233 N. Michigan Avenue
Suite 2150

Chicago, IL 60601-5800

<http://www.ahima.org>

Web Links:

American Academy of Professional Coders

Contains information about the profession, educational materials published by the Academy, and certifications.

<http://www.aapc.com>

American Health Information Management Association

Learn about careers in health information and see descriptions of coding certifications.

<http://www.ahima.org>

American Medical Association

Contains explanations of how codes are created and other interesting facts. Enter "CPT codes" or "ICD-9-CM" in the search box.

<http://www.ama-assn.org>

JustCoding.Com

Contains lots of information about coding and the coding profession.

<http://www.justcoding.com>