



### **Breakthrough to excellence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century health information management practices: bridging the existing gaps**

Segun Michael Omole<sup>1</sup>, Isaac Adeniran<sup>2</sup>, Tajudeen Temitayo Adebayo<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Health Information Management, Osun State College of Health Technology, Ilesa, Nigeria; <sup>2</sup>Department of Health Information Management, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria; <sup>3</sup>Department of Health Records, Federal Medical Centre, Owo, Nigeria

Corresponding author: E-mail: [osegunmicheal@g.mail.com](mailto:osegunmicheal@g.mail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Health information management practices involve the area of general administrative management that is concerned with achieving economy and efficiency in the creation, maintenance, use, evaluation and disposition of patients' health records, during their entire life cycle. It is the application of the systematic and scientific control over recorded information that is required in the operations of healthcare organization's business. Such control is exercised over the creation, distribution, utilization, retention, storage, retrieval, protection, preservation and final disposal of all types of patients' health records/information within an organization. The healthcare provider makes an entry into the medical records with the actual occurrence of the event. The ability to maintain accurate and timely record is critical for the delivery of quality patient care which is the core of health records/information management practices<sup>1</sup>.

Efficiency of health information management practices can only be achieved through effective application of the five basic systems of managing health information. Such as: Numbering system, Filing system, Tracing, system, Appointment system, Coding and indexing systems, which could be operated in a manual form, computer assisted form and full electronic form. The six primary objectives of managing health information are: Continuous Care, Communication, Planning and Administration, Medical Care Evaluation, Medico-Legal Purposes, Education and Research<sup>2</sup>. This is why public health law stipulates the legal requirements relating to health records management practices

that: There shall be a health records department with adequate space, equipment and qualified personnel: A health record shall be created for each patient at the time of admission: All health records shall contain identification data, clinical data and administrative data: Health records shall be filed in an accessible manner at a secured place in the hospital and shall be kept for a minimum of 25 years after the discharge of the patient, except that original health records may be destroyed sooner; if they are microfilmed, computerized or digitized by a process approved by the Federal Ministry of Health<sup>3</sup>.

## **Who is a Health Information Management Professional?**

Health Information Management (HIM) Practitioner is saddled with the responsibility of providing accurate documentation and registration of patient health information, and up-to-date health statistical information, on hospital activities analysis, both on curative and preventive health services, either as inpatient or outpatient, through the process of gathering and collection of patient information and its manipulation for meaningful decision making<sup>4</sup>. The World Health Organization submits that health records management practitioners are healthcare professionals, responsible for collecting, capturing, storing, analyzing distributing and protecting medical information fundamental to providing quality patient care. The information supplied by them is used by physicians and other healthcare professionals to provide optimum patient care, and support important medical decisions<sup>5</sup>.

A HIM Professional must therefore have completed a Professional Diploma (PD) or Higher

National Diploma (HND) from any of the Diploma Schools or Bachelors/Master degree in health information management or Health Records Administration and Bio-Statistics from a recognized university. In addition, he must possess a professional registration license issued by the Health Records Officers' Registration Board of Nigeria for eligibility to practice the profession in Nigeria. Ethics of the profession must be held inviolate by such practitioner<sup>6</sup>. This is why Omole outlined the specific functions of a HIM Professional as follow:

### **Functions of health information management practitioner**

- i. Creation, care, custody, storage and retrieval of patients' health information.
- ii. Documentation and registration of patients' physical and demographic information.
- iii. Provision of statistical information from the health records, for medical, administrative, research, monitoring and evaluation.
- iv. Rendering of associated services concerned with the release of patients' health information, such as legal services, insurance services and international health agencies' information needs e.g. WHO.
- v. Coding and indexing of diseases and operations for compilation of morbidity and mortality health information at local, state and national levels for purposes of identifying specific areas of interventions.
- vi. Establishment of effective numbering control in order to facilitate accessibility of health information for research study towards development of good surveillance strategies.
- vii. Maintenance of confidentiality of health information to protect personally identifiable information from unauthorized persons.
- viii. Ensuring continuity of patient care through the establishment of an effective appointment system.
- ix. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of health information and development of appropriate indicators for the evaluation of health services rendered.
- x. Participation in various training, programmed towards the development of health information management practices, which are aimed at

contributing to advancement of knowledge in the practice.

Furthermore, the followings are the ethics that a HIM Practitioner must know for his or her effective practice as indicated by Omole<sup>7</sup>.

### **Ethics of Health Information Management Practice in Nigeria**

- i. Be a member of Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners' of Nigeria, while practicing the profession in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.
- ii. Place Service before material gains; places the honor of the profession before personal advantage; place the health and welfare of patients, above all personal and financial interest. And conduct him/her self in the practice of this profession so as to bring honor to him/her self, his associates, and to the Health Information Management Profession.
- iii. Preserve and protect the health information in his custody and hold inviolate the privileged contents of the records and any other information of confidential nature obtained in his official capacity, taking due account of applicable statutes and regulations and policies of his employer.
- iv. Refuse to participate in or conceal unethical practices and procedures in your relationship with other individuals or organizations.
- v. Serve his employer loyally, honorably discharging the duties and responsibilities entrusted to him and give due consideration to the nature of his responsibilities in giving his employer notice of intent to resign his appointment.
- vi. Avoid encroachment on the professional responsibilities of the medical and other professions and under no circumstances, assumes the right to make decisions in professional area outside the scope of his assigned responsibilities.
- vii. Strive to advance the knowledge and practice of Health Records/Information Science and Technology, including continued self-improvement in order to contribute to the best possible medical care.

- viii. Participate appropriately in developing and strengthening professional manpower and in properly representing the profession in the public.
- ix. Discharge honorably the responsibilities of Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria's post, to which appointed or elected, and preserve the confidentiality of any privileged information made known to him in his official capacity.
- x. State truthfully and accurately, his credentials, professional education and experience in any official transaction where such are called for.

### Health Information Management Practice as a Profession in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century

A profession is a vocation founded upon specialized educational training, the purpose of which is to supply disinterested objective counsel and service to others, for a direct and definite compensation, wholly apart from expectation of other business gain. A professional is a member of a profession or any person who earns their living from a specified/specialized activity<sup>8</sup>. The term also describes the standard of education and training that prepares members of the profession with the particular knowledge and skills necessary to perform the role of that profession (Wikipedia, 2015). The Oxford English Dictionary in 2001 defines profession as "public declaration; business or a profession, which one publicly avows". It could be described as a type of job that needs special training or skill. The characteristics of a profession as identified by Nwalo are<sup>8</sup>:

- i. A profession is learned, since it is based on a substantial body of knowledge (science) or art (skill) held as a common possession and extended by united effort (research).
- ii. A profession is guided by altruism or a concern for the client who comes for help. It has a standard of conduct based on courtesy, honor, and ethics which guides the practitioner in his relations with clients, colleagues and the public.
- iii. A profession has techniques or skills which can be taught. The skills are taught through a relatively long educational process based on the body of knowledge and art, in which the professional group has recognized responsibility.

- iv. A profession is practical, since this body of knowledge can be used to solve human problems.
- v. It has a standard of professional qualification for admission into the professional group, based on character, training and proven competence.
- vi. A profession is based on recognition of status by one's colleagues, or by the state as a basis of good standing.
- vii. A profession has an organization or the professional group devoted to its common advancement and its social duty rather than the maintenance of economic monopoly.
- viii. The practitioners of a profession enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy and should have the ability to exercise independent judgment in problem-solving.
- ix. A profession has an official publication for advancement of knowledge of the profession.
- x. A profession must be useful to society and its practice should be able to provide adequate means of livelihood for the practitioner.

Professional associations should not be categorized with trade unions. Trade unions fight for the improvement of the conditions of service of employees whereas, professional bodies pursue the development of techniques and styles of operation. The profession provides a service which is very important to the society<sup>8</sup>. The extent and nature of the profession's specialized knowledge, society grants its members a monopoly in improving the professional service and the authority to control admission to their ranks and to evaluate as well as regulate their own performance. Examples of how the professional attributes are applicable to Health Information Management Practice are:

- i. **Health Information Management Practice is learned:** This is to say that it is based on a substantial body of knowledge (theories and principles), for example, health records management systems, coding and indexing principles, management theory, principles of health and hospital statistics, and so on.
- ii. **Health Information Management Practice has techniques and skills, which can be taught:** The teaching is done through a process of formal

- education in universities, polytechnics and monotechnics for considerably long periods. The basic qualification in health information management practice is Bachelor's degree (B.HIM) or HND or HT, which takes a minimum of four years to obtain for candidates admitted from Joint Matriculation Examination (J.M.E.). A Master's degree in Health Information Management in Nigeria takes a minimum of 18 calendar months. The PhD. degree programme takes a minimum of 36 calendar months.
- iii. **Health Information Management Practice as a Profession is guided by Altruism:** In Health Information Management Service, the HIM Practitioner considers the interest of the patients and clients first, before any other thing. Health information practitioners always place service before material gain and strive at all times to provide services consistent with the need for quality healthcare and treatment to all, who are ill and injured, as contained in their code of ethics<sup>3</sup>.
  - iv. **Health Information Management as a Profession is Intellectual and carries with it a great personal responsibility for the exercise of Choice and Judgment:** Health information management services like coding and indexing, compilation of hospital and vital statistics, answering researchers' queries, confidentiality of patients' health records and selective dissemination of health information are all intellectual activities. The practice in all its ramifications also involves intellectualism for success, because within the framework of general principles of the practice, the HIM Professional is constantly confronted with situations, where he needs to exercise discretion or choice.
  - v. **Health Information Management Practice is Practical:** The impact of health information management services is felt by the society. This is especially the patients, clients and researchers to whom the services have been rendered. This is why HIM students are attached to standard hospitals for a reasonable length of time during the course of their programme in schools of health information management.
  - vi. **Health Information Management Practice has a Standard of Professional Qualifications for Admission into the Profession:** In Nigeria, the minimum professional qualification is B.Sc. or HND or HT/PD in health information management. The schools of health information set minimum entry requirements, which all aspiring candidates must possess. Admission into the profession is also based on proven competence through annual registration and licensing examinations organized by Health Records Officers' Registration Board of Nigeria, for graduates from Schools of Health Information Management, seeking to become member of the profession.
  - vii. **Recognition of Status of Health Information Management Practice by the Government:** The Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria (AHRIMPN) formerly known as Nigerian Health Records Association (NHRA) has succeeded in getting the Nigerian government to make a law backing up health records/information management practice as a profession. This law came into effect in 1989 as Health Records Officers' Registration Board of Nigeria via Decree 39 of 1989. The Health Records Officers' Registration Board of Nigeria is a statutory agency of the federal government established by Decree N0.39 of 1989, for the control and practice of the profession of Health Information Management in Nigeria<sup>9</sup>.
  - viii. **Health Information Management Practice has Professional Association at National Level:** The Nigerian Health Records Association (now known as Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria (AHRIMPN) has branches in all the states of the federation, all of which promote the practice of the profession through meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences.
  - ix. **International Journal Health Records and Information Management (IJHRIM):** This is a journal devoted

to the promotion of excellent professional practice through research and publication. It is jointly owned by the Association, AHRIMPN and the regulatory body, HRORBN. The journal also takes care of informing members of forthcoming meetings and other activities that are of interest to all members of the profession. Similar journals are Health Information Management Journal hosted by the Health Information Management Association of Australia (HIMAA). Perspectives in Health Information Management and Journal of AHIMA hosted by the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA). Journal of America Medical Informatics Association (JAMIA) hosted by America Medical Informatics Association. At the international level, we have the International Federation of Health Information Management Association (I.F.H.M.A) – formerly known as IFHRO (International Federation of Health Records Officers), which publishes the IFHIMA Journal circulated, all over the world to promote professionalism in health information management practice.

- x. **Health Information Management Practice as a Profession is useful to the Society:** Reports of AHIMA proved that health information is essential for socioeconomic development<sup>10</sup>. Health information is necessary for development and advancement in medical knowledge, healthcare service delivery, education and training, planning, monitoring and evaluation and government decision-making activities. Health Records department in the health institutions collects health information, manages health information and facilitate selective dissemination of health information to legitimate users in the society for developmental purposes

Considering all the above stated attributes of a profession as they applied to Health Information Management Practice therefore, there is no doubt that Health Information Management Practices by every standard is a profession in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Existing Gaps in Health Information Management Practices in Nigeria**

Despite the fact that health information management practices fulfilled almost all the basic attributes of a profession, there is still room for improvement in the following specific areas of the practice:

- i. Non publication from time to time, the list of registered health records practitioners as stipulated in part 1 section 2(b) of decree 39 of 1989.
- ii. Lack of full professionalization of some health institutions' department of health records/information management, which is not in the best interest of the practice.
- iii. Irregular conduct of continuing professional development education programs for knowledge advancement among HIM professionals.
- iv. Stagnated career progression, due to poor implementation of the enabling scheme of service for Health Records Officers Cadre
- v. Non recognition of health information management professionals for top managerial positions in the health industry.
- vi. Limited number of degree awarding institutions in health information management in Nigeria.
- vii. Lack of special remuneration package for health information management practitioners like their counterparts in other professions.

### **Breakthrough to Excellence in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Health Information Management Practice**

Breakthrough to Excellence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Health Information Management Practice can only be achieved via competitive advantage in health information practice, which involves the legal collection of information on your colleagues and the overall practice and the systematic application of the knowledge gained from this information into your own life (wisdom) in order to have a leading edge above others in the practice. The following subsections answer these all.

#### **Activities involved in Competitive Advantage**

It is all about being innovative, in order to stand the test of time. It involves knowing what you are doing, knowing what others are doing and do your own better. Since there is competition in and around us, whatsoever you do, you are not the only one doing it; hence, you must put in your best in everything you do. Remember, "Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it in a best way", since, you have competitors in the field of Health Information Management (your colleagues). You

and your professional colleagues are offering comparable products and services. You are all out for the same professional objectives. These are to have;

1. Good income.
2. Good reputation & growth and
3. Good career success.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Health Information Management Practitioners are effectively at warfare; fighting to gain the same resource and territory and like in a war situation, it is therefore necessary to understand the enemy. To win a war, it is essential to understand;

1. The enemy's plans.
2. His thought process.
3. His strength.
4. His weakness.
5. Where he can be attacked.
6. Where the risk of the attack is too great.
7. What he plans to do next.

Haliso, informed that, around the year 500BC, Sun Tzu, the great Chinese military strategist, wrote in his book; the Art of War, that<sup>11</sup>;

1. "If you are ignorant of both your enemy and yourself, then you are a fool and certain to be defeated in every battle!"
2. "If you know yourself, but not your enemy, for every battle won, you will suffer a loss!"
3. "If you know your enemy and yourself, you will win every battle!"

### Strategies of gaining Competitive Advantage

You must utilize the available information from and about your practice, your colleagues, your environment, people around you, your products or services and everything you are surrounded with, to fill a gap in knowledge and cognitive reasoning in order to have a competitive edge in Health Information Management Practice.

Remember your ultimate goals in the practice are:

1. Good income
2. Good reputation & growth, and
3. Good career success:

All these can only be achieved through accessibility and utilization of:

1. Adequate facts
2. Adequate information
3. Adequate knowledge, and
4. Adequate wisdom

Information use can only be accomplished, when you read books omnivorously: When you read you lead; when you read you become seriously sound; when you read, your brain is

developed; when you read; it pushes you up and you get to the zenith of your career<sup>12</sup>.

### Things that Fast-Track Breakthrough in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Finally, for any man or woman to be successful in life: The following factors are responsible;

1. Good academic qualification (Certificate).
2. Good job that gives you income (Formal or Informal).
3. Good Marriage.
4. Faith in Almighty God.
5. Family (Nuclear, Extended & In-laws)
6. Friendship (Professional, Non-Professional & Out-laws)
7. Fortune (Opportunity)
8. Skill (Technical and Administrative)
9. Teamwork (Collaboration)
10. Integrity (Character + Talent/Gift)

### CONCLUSION

In the course of this study, inferences were drawn from existing literature and relevant decree that "only those Health Information Management Practitioners registered with the Health Records Officers' Registration Board of Nigeria have legal right to practice the profession in Nigeria"<sup>6</sup>. This result agrees with part iv of the Decree which empowers the Board to "establish a body to be known as the Health Records Officers' Disciplinary Committee, which shall be charged with the duty of considering and determining any case referred to it"<sup>13</sup>.

The submission of Kurau in a Circular letter NO: C.3689/T1/10, dated 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2015 from the Department of Human Resources Management of the Federal Ministry of Health, which admonished various establishments to ensure that; "(i) only qualified and licensed health records officers are assigned to managed health records in the hospitals, (ii) only persons with requisite qualification(s) and duly licensed are appointed to practice as health records officers or technicians; and (iii) only persons with practicing license are presented for promotion interviews, in the Civil Service of the Federation or of a state or any public or private establishment, body or institution, in Nigeria," also supported this.

Health information management practitioners must utilize the available information in and around them about the practice, to fill the gap in knowledge and cognitive reasoning in order

to have a competitive edge in Health Information Management Practice of this 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. The regulatory body, HRORBN should publish from time to time, the list of registered health information management practitioners as stipulated in part 1 section 2(b) of decree 39 of 1989.
- ii. Government at all levels should ensure full professionalization of all health institutions' departments of health information management.
- iii. HRORBN should embark on regular conduct of mandatory continuing professional development education programme, for knowledge advancement among HIM professionals.
- iv. The professional association, AHRIMPN should do the needful to reverse the stagnated career progression, by facilitating implementation of the enabling scheme of service for HIM Professionals.
- v. AHRIMPN should do the needful to enhance recognition of HIM professionals for top managerial positions in the healthcare industry.
- vi. The duo of AHRIMPN and HRORBN should liaise with the NUC towards increasing the number of degree awarding institutions in health information management in Nigeria.
- vii. AHRIMPN and HRORBN romance with National Wages and Salaries Commission for call duty allowance for health records officers doing call duties and special remuneration package for all HIM Professionals, like their counterparts in other professions, should be strengthened.
- viii. Health Information Management Practitioners should utilize the available information in and around them about their practice, to fill the gap in knowledge and cognitive reasoning in order to have a competitive edge in Health Information Management Practice.

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### Authors Contribution:

SMO conceived of the study, initiated its design, participated in literature search, article selection and review, data analysis and coordination and drafted the manuscript. IA and TTA participated in the design, literature search, article selection and review, data analysis and coordination and reviewed the final manuscript.