

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY TIPS FOR GENERAL CODING

KNOWLEDGE BASE DEVELOPMENT

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CODING PROGRAM/INTERNSHIP

Have you decided to pursue an education in coding, billing, and/or reimbursement? There are a lot of additional free or low cost practice and learning opportunities that one might take advantage of to supplement any curriculum that one may choose. Most of the following things that I list are the things that I did prior to taking the CCS to just allow myself to learn, practice, and absorb as much as I could. Personally, I think the number one thing to do is to introduce oneself to the coding/HIM manager of one or more facilities [it does not have to be a hospital, it can be a physician office, or SNF and/or many others] and request an opportunity to volunteer there and also recode records while onsite as well as read the official resources (Coding Clinic/CPT Assistant/Coder's Desk Reference/any other excellent references they may have).

A good coding or health information program would require one to search out at least two different facilities and secure a mentor agreement which would allow one to “formally” be permitted to “practice” at the facility. The mentor would agreement will include information on issues such as privacy and confidentiality as required by the student attending the facility. In such a case, there would be no need to purchase the *Coding Clinic* or *CPT Assistant* and maybe even other classic resources or periodicals if one can effectively study these sources at either the healthcare facility or even at an academic/medical library. If your program does not have this “internship requirement,” try making the opportunity yourself by contacting the facility and introducing yourself, the coding program you are in, your career goals, etc. and request to volunteer/practice there. Be prepared to sign a confidentiality/privacy agreement and possibly take a few orientation or training sessions covering these concepts. Here is one key to getting a variety of experience—volunteering or working with a small to mid-sized facility or clinic or contract company that handles all sorts of cases or clients; the key is to work with a healthcare entity that has sundry cases, providers, and clients to get experience with different software and hardware systems, various electronic record systems, and various insurances or payers and their billing policies.

As for a coding/billing program, it is recommended that one consider only an AHIMA-approved coding program. There are companies that specify completion of such a program in their job ads. A list of these can be found at this site: http://www.ahima.org/careers/college_search/search.asp The last thing you want to do is go through a program like at a technical school or offered by a company or individual(s) that does not teach you half of what you need to know and that employers do not recognize. If it is not possible to attend an approved coding program, the next best thing is to attend a certificate program that is part of an accredited HIT or HIM program. Be sure the health information programs are accredited by CAHIIM. <http://cahiim.org/directory/>

INTERNET

The *Internet* also has a wealth of learning and practice opportunities. There are many coding websites/discussion forums where one can read scores of questions and answers, archives of articles or presentations, and even archives of coding exercises, cases, or quizzes. Some of the best websites are organizationally or company owned and others are individually owned. **I do not recommend just passively reading the questions and answers, but I recommend reading the question, guessing at the answer, and then comparing it to any answer(s) provided.** Always try to make a note in your coding book or separate notebook of each answer that you are fairly sure is correct; do not neglect to note where you got the information from so that you can refer back to the source if needed. One does have to *BEWARE* as all answers given on the sites may or may not be correct. As a general rule of thumb, the most active places on the Internet where many coders are constantly asking and answering questions are the best. The less active sites are not a very good choice because wrong answers given there are not likely to be corrected by other professionals reviewing the discussion.

AHIMA is one of the organizations that offers many active coding discussion forums called communities of practice as a member's only service. I recommend joining this organization as a student member if you are presently enrolled in an AHIMA-approved coding program. I recommend joining all the coding-related CoPs after joining AHIMA. Check for coding questions and answers as well as resources, frequently asked questions, websites or links, community news, and anything else that potentially has any coding relevant information. All these resources are excellent for learning from what others have asked and the answers provided and they are excellent for keeping up with changes as well. It may be advantageous to keep in mind that coding information easily becomes obsolete (this applies even with the *Coding Clinic*): codes and guidelines are constantly being revised, added, and deleted. So as you utilize these and all resources as much as possible, keep that in mind. Don't forget about the AHIMA Body of Knowledge. This is a library of resources for coding and other health information topics. Many articles and coding scenarios are there. Again, don't forget to be aware of outdated codes and outdated coding advice.

Here is one last tip: oftentimes an article or website will include an outdated or invalid link. Links to websites are constantly changing and the best way to cope with that is to copy and paste the entire link into a separate web browser page and then proceed to delete the ending section of the link all the way back to the main page. For example, let's say the following link did not work: <https://www.aameda.org/Specialtygroups/ACOA/oncology1.html> What you would do is reenter this link in another web browser and delete the ending portion of the link hoping that you find the original site that may perhaps still work: <https://www.aameda.org>. Alternatively, you can reenter some key words that describe the webpage in a search engine and it can lead you to the alternative web link. Keep a running lists of updated and valid websites that you find helpful bookmarked in your browser for ready reference while coding.

BOOKS

As for *coding manuals*, I would like to advise one to utilize the following: the Professional Edition of CPT by the American Medical Association and an edition of ICD-9-CM that includes supplementary information such as medical definitions for the various pathologies

like the Education Annotation of ICD-9-CM by Channel Publishing. This could really save someone new to the field a lot of research. The Professional Edition of CPT contains all the instructional notes and official CPT guidelines for coding the procedures and knowledge of all of these are crucial. CMS has a excel files for the HCPCS codes, but as for a HCPCS text, a version that seemed very helpful was the HCPCS Expert by Ingenix. It included references to the *AHA Coding Clinic for HCPCS*, lots of explanatory notes in each section of the codes explaining what the codes are for and how they are used with relation to various insurances, an expanded table of drugs, and references to many of CMS's guidelines. I don't recommend using any sort of software program or encoder when initially learning coding except grouper software. Use of these programs can potentially lead to numerous errors and when initially preparing for your certification exams after your program of study is complete, proficiency with using coding books will prove invaluable because the exams do not allow the use of any sort of computer software.

As for *coding textbooks*, one of the best lines of texts explaining coding, are those by AHIMA. These are found not only in the AHIMA bookstore, but also on other trade sites as well. If your coding program does not use AHIMA's textbooks, you might find getting one or more of these texts to be a worthy investment. The AHIMA bookstore includes a fairly detailed description of the topics that each book covers, and you can compare that to what information is covered in the textbooks that are in your program. *Basic ICD-9-CM Coding Exercises* and *Basic CPT/HCPCS Coding* explains ICD-9-CM and CPT/HCPCS coding, respectively and provides guidance along with practice exercises for improving one's coding skills.

For the reimbursement aspects of coding, AHIMA has several books: *Effective Management of Coding Services* and *Principles of Healthcare Reimbursement*. Both of these texts give you a broader view of coding as a whole and the latter text actually walks you through the different healthcare settings and reimbursement or payment systems that are in place for each setting as well as issues relating to health insurance billing in general. AHIMA also has the following three separate texts for inpatient, outpatient, and physician coding and reimbursement combined: *Coding and Reimbursement for Hospital Inpatient Services*, *Coding and Reimbursement for Hospital Outpatient Services*, and *Coding and Reimbursement for Physician Services*. The last two texts include case studies and a detailed walk through of CPT guidelines by chapter.

One of the best *study guides* for AHIMA certification exams is the Professional Review Guide (PRG). This guide gives you practice on multiple choice questions and coding cases and the CD familiarizes you with the computerized aspect of the exam. But this guide has its weaknesses as it has errors and to me, it does not give you enough background to pass the multiple choice section in particular for the CCS. There are many guides out there and a full discussion of these guides is outside the scope of this article, so my best advice is to do your research on the study guides out there and evaluate them based upon the multiple choice competencies for the coding credential you are studying for and the knowledge and experience you may already have with regards to coding and reimbursement.

It is hard to define a specific text that is most useful for the CCS exam because the CCS exam is a standard mastery credential that covers inpatient and outpatient coding and the multiple choice competencies cover a wide range of issues now. Most likely a combination of the above mentioned texts and study guides along with the *Clinical Coding Workout*

which I discuss below will be most helpful. As for books, the main ones that I had in my possession that were helpful to me were the ones I had remaining from my coding courses. I used one called Basic ICD-9 coding for reviewing I-9 and I used the physician text for CPT. For extra practice, I had the PRG study guide and *Clinical Coding Workout*. I used *Effective Management of Coding Services* and the AHIMA classic HIT and HIM texts for any additional topics in the multiple choice competencies and reimbursement concepts that were not covered else where. After the books had taken me as far as they could, I researched the Internet for information.

Coding and Reimbursement for Physician Services is the #1 resource for those planning on the CCS-P. Not only does it explain coding for CPT (broken down by chapters and body systems), but it also fully explains the billing and reimbursement aspects of coding that are so crucial to the multiple choice competencies covered including the CMS 1500 form, modifiers, HCPCS Level II codes, etc. Personally, I had virtually no experience in physician coding, but using this textbook along with thoroughly studying the CPT code manual referenced above gave me much of the background I needed. (I had already taken the CCS and much of what I did to study for that helped as well.) *Clinical Coding Workout* is an excellent practice text—the following is a description that I gave of it one time in a discussion. “It contains practice questions on the basics of ICD-9-CM and CPT and HCPCS. It has many one-liner exercises and more extended exercises for beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. It even includes case studies for inpatient, ambulatory surgery, and physician office for the intermediate and advanced levels. This would be an excellent supplementary study/practice book for the CCS or the CCS-P exam.” It even has information on ICD-10.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Of course there are *hard copy subscriptions* that one can get as well like the *Journal of AHIMA* which has a special section with coding articles and quizzes in each issue. The *CodeWrite* AHIMA publication includes lots of great articles and questions or case challenges for practice. For answers to the *CodeWrite* challenges, I suggest networking with other coders and students concerning most likely answers or attending the coding roundtables. One can also use this publication for getting familiar with I-10 as well: AHIMA has other texts for learning this also. You can also subscribe to other magazines like *For the Record* or *ADVANCE for HIM professionals* and have access to lots of great coding articles; some of these articles include practice exercises or questions. *Advance* even has a section for articles specific to the CCS or CCS-P. The key with supplementing your coding knowledge base is to get real coding cases from wherever you can!

Happy studying!
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