HOME HEALTH ICD-9/ICD-10 ALERT

CODING UPDATE: DON'T LET SPECIAL WORD MEANINGS THROW THE BOOK AT YOUR CLAIMS

Small words give quick guidance - if you understand them.

You may think you know what "and" means - but you may be surprised.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and the National Center for Health Statistics released an update to the official guidelines for ICD-9-CM coding - effective April 1 - including many clarifications that can make your job as a coder easier.

The guidelines were approved by the four organizations that make up the "Cooperating Parties" for the ICD-9-CM: the American Medical Association, the American Health Information Management Association, CMS and NCHS.

Some of the changes apply to specific conditions, such as diabetes. Others are general conventions that apply to all codes. Paying attention to coding conventions is crucial for correct coding, says Sue Bowman, director of coding policy and compliance with the Chicago-based American Health Information Management Association.

One addition to coding conventions defines the words "and," "with," "see" and "see also." Understanding how to interpret these words as you determine what code to use will improve your accuracy, experts say.

"See also" after a main term in the index indicates there is another main term you can look at that may provide additional useful index entries. But if the main term you are already referencing provides the code you need, you do not have to check the other entry, the guidelines tell you.

Example: For a patient with viral pneumonia, you might first look in the index under "Virus, viral." The entry includes codes for viral infection NEC and viral septicemia. It also states "see also condition." This tells you to look for "Pneumonia" instead, where you will find codes for various viral pneumonia diagnoses.

Editor's Note: The revised ICD-9 guidelines are at www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/icd9/icdguide.pdf.