

Title

Perspectives on Capturing Social Determinants of Health Codes in EHRs for New Federal Policy

Abstract

Background: As social determinants of health (SDoH) are increasingly acknowledged for their profound influence on perpetuating poor health outcomes, there are growing efforts to incentivize medical practices to capture SDoH data in the EHR for individualized care. The recent approval of a new clinical policy by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services for Evaluation and Management (E/M) office visits, which accounts for SDoH in Medical Decision Making, promises to improve patient outcomes significantly. However, to fully realize these benefits, it is crucial to gain insight from Health Information professionals, who are on the front lines of capturing patient data to enrich clinical decision-making— while optimizing reimbursement.

Objective: To explore the perspectives of Health Information professionals on capturing SDoH codes (Z-codes) in the EHR for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) new outpatient Evaluation and Management (E/M) coding policy.

Methods: Through an exploratory study design, this qualitative study with licensed Health Information professionals from 2020-2021 comprised six focus group discussions with 43 participants and five semistructured interviews with three participants. Following transcription, qualitative data were analyzed thematically and measured to validate the findings were implemented.

Results: The findings indicate the many benefits of capturing SDoH data, including improved outcomes, federal funding for social care services, systematic SDoH screening, and increased payment for complex patients with social needs. However, drawbacks, such as the clinical documentation training required to quantify the level of risk, lack of proficient use of EHRs among clinicians, and the challenge of locating SDoH data in the EHR, highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Conclusion: There is an opportunity to prioritize the participation of Health information professionals in future studies to provide practical insights and strategic guidance for coding policies that increase the usage of SDoH Z codes to advance healthcare quality and equity.