The shifting landscape of health information management: an education and career perspective

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“A Health Information Manager has always been that someone capable of enabling information management to better support the work of a health system” (Cooper, 2009).

The digital health space
It would be fair to say that we as a professional entity are at the brink of a precipice. We are witnessing a digital health revolution in Australia and globally. With the recent introduction of open-source web-based EMRs for developing nations such as AMPATH\(^1\) and OpenMRS\(^2\) e-record systems, we come to understand that healthcare is an information business and its effective management is seen to have transformed health-care delivery (Hannan, 2014). In addition, the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA Work Group, 2014) stated that the need for health informatics has never been greater, especially because of the power it can harness from the metadata collected for informed medical decision making and healthcare improvement.

Relevance of health information management within the digital health space
In a period where technologies are rapidly evolving, one of the main challenges healthcare organisations face is to establish the capability to deliver a high quality electronic platform for the delivery and recording of patient care as well as the ability to meaningfully interpret healthcare data along the data – information – knowledge continuum.

This is where the health information management profession brings value into the vast space of health informatics. Health Information Managers (HIMs) can come from a range of clinical, professional and administrative backgrounds. Their combination of clinical and information management skills enables them to ensure seamless interoperability of clinical information systems and the use of patient level data as it is transformed into information and knowledge. HIMs are custodians of data and information within a healthcare setting.

Through their activities in clinical documentation improvement, clinical coding, and health analytics, HIMs have the ability and skills to be able to manage an abundance of data, integrating meaningful data into daily practices and workflow and thus balancing usability with functionality (Orlova, 2015; Simpao, Galvez and Rehman, 2015).

Health information management skills shortage
In its 2009 report, The National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission emphasised the increasing need in Australia for a health workforce that can cohesively blend and use interactive and accountable information and communication technologies (ICT) as the transformative backbone to ensuring greater clinical and community engagement within the system (Georgiou and Callen 2011; Pena-Lopez 2010; Showell 2011). Cooper (2009) and Toth (2010) reflected that over the past decade government planners, legislators, healthcare academics and clinicians in Australia have worked towards achieving this transformative change and in the process have understood that:

- The dividing gap between the demand for health information management graduates and their supply is on the increase.
- There is a need to review and restructure the health information management educational curricula in terms of the degrees and pathways offered to students and aspiring healthcare professionals passionate to pursue a career path in health information management.

Our career paths
Our particular career paths follow a transition from frontline clinical roles to health information management professionals. We believe there is great opportunity for new educational pathways to be developed for healthcare professionals interested in pursuing opportunities within the health information management arena.

As healthcare professionals from South Asia we had the opportunity to work within government hospitals as well as in primary healthcare and not-for-profit organisations. This

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1 AMPATH (Academic Model for Providing Access to Healthcare) is a global consortium of academic health centres working with Kenya’s Ministry of Health to deliver health services and provide research. See http://www.ampathkenya.org/

2 OpenMRS is an open source medical record system that allows medical workers to track and store medical information. It was developed by volunteers worldwide to support health delivery in developing countries. See http://openmrs.org/
enabled us to gain a bird’s eye view of the different services and governing bodies that interlink and enable the functioning of an efficient and effective healthcare system. It also exposed us to the redundant treatment models and workflows that were still being followed in hospitals and health services across developing nations, giving rise to a disparity in the quality of care delivered across the healthcare spectrum.

Being able to deliver good quality healthcare in an efficient and equitable manner has been a motivating influence in our chosen professional area. This in fact also served as the deciding factor that persuaded us to pursue our Master’s degree in Health Services Management. During this time, we were fortunate to gain experience working with the Health Information Services (HIS) at metropolitan tertiary hospitals in Brisbane. An eye opener during this period was in understanding the pivotal role HIS play in contemporary healthcare in streamlining adequate and accurate healthcare data. This is essential to good clinical outcomes for patient safety, quality assurance, utilisation review, case mix, research and funding (Watson, 2008).

The transition from delivering healthcare services as a clinician to managing information, data and systems at a frontline level as a HIM was a bit overwhelming at first. This was particularly so in terms of understanding the various information systems and their overall value in delivering optimal healthcare services. Cooper (2009) gives justification to this in her article “Changing Roles of Health Information Managers- an education perspective” identifying that in the past two decades the scope, breadth and depth of a HIM’s role has evolved so as to retain relevance within the changing world. From solely managing the medical records service in the 1980s and 1990s, today’s HIM professionals are seen as strategic leaders who connect and drive the functioning of clinical, operational and administrative services within healthcare facilities (Simpao Galvez, and Rehman 2015).

Globally, HiSs and their HiMs across every healthcare facility have over time grown to embrace the concept of a continuous learning health system. Through cycles of data analytics and knowledge generation, the vision is to instil capacity and commitment of learning at all levels within the healthcare system, thus changing consumer behaviour and transforming organisational practice (Orlova 2015). From a personal perspective, every day is a new day that brings forth new challenges and learning concepts to this rapidly advancing space. This in fact has been a constant source of motivation and has also enabled us to understand the changes happening within the healthcare system and build on our competencies to a level far greater than we had previously imagined.

A way forward

Given the rapidly changing landscape of Australian healthcare where we face a growing shortage of health information management skills, we believe that students and healthcare professionals interested in pursuing education and career opportunities within health information management should prioritise experiential learning opportunities coupled with continuing professional development courses. This will enable them to build on specific major skill sets. As stated by the Health Information Management Association of Australia (2014) this may include a cross-functional perspective, managing a coding system and coding data quality, data presentation techniques as well payment funding models and processes.

As Albert Einstein rightly stated “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.”

Common to all health information management professionals are the foundational skills and knowledge they gain in health sciences, information and management. However, what is unique to each individual is their ongoing professional development and growth motivated by interest, change and opportunity. This is why professional governing bodies such as the Health Informatics Society of Australia and HIMAA ought to focus their attention at a grass-root level while undertaking active succession planning for the next generation workforce. This will ensure that individuals who possess the relevant currency of practical skill sets are absorbed into the health information management workforce and given opportunities for continuing professional development and learning.

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References


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