A review of health information management education in China

Yan Shufan

Introduction
This article provides an outline of formal school-based education in Health Information Management (HIM) in China and the need for higher HIM education in the future.

There was no medical record education (the predecessor of Health Information Management education) in China until 1985. The introduction of medical record management was synchronous with Western countries such as the United States in 1921; however, education in this field in China was more than five decades behind. In the past, a medical record department recruited one or more persons and trained them individually on-the-job.

The origin and development of medical record education in China

The 1980s – the initial stage
With the open reform policy being carried out in China in 1980, medical sciences received special attention and development. Medical record reform, however, lagged relatively far behind. At this time there were very few personnel who had received formal education in medical record management.

In 1980, a bilateral agreement was established between the Cumberland College of Health Sciences (CCHS) at Lidcombe, NSW (now the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney), and the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences (CAMS). Staff from both institutions exchanged many visits. Dr Graeme Watts, Deputy Principal of CCHS, strongly supported the Chinese initiative and visited China many times. Professor Phyllis Watson also visited China several times to support and promote the profession in the medical record department of the People’s Union Medical College (PUMC) Hospital and to institute medical record education. Under the agreement, two medical record officers from PUMC were sent to the School of Medical Record Administration (now the School of Health Information Management) at the College for 12 months to study medical record administration. During their stay, Liu Aimin and Professor Watson prepared a syllabus for a program in Medical Record Management to be offered at the Chongwen District Health School in Beijing.

The 1990s – the development stage
During the 1990s, medical record education began to progress in China:
- First in quantity, with the development from one school, the Chongwen District Health School in Beijing, to about 40 schools offering medical record education, and
- second, with teaching materials.
  In 1992, the head of Chongwen Health School, Chen Yucai, sponsored by the International Federation of Health Records Organizations (IFHRO) and the Canadian Health Records Association, attended the 11th International Health Records Congress in Vancouver, Canada. Dr Chen attended the Educators’ Information Exchange Workshop and received a set of teaching materials in English (the Learning Packages for Medical Record Practice), compiled by the Education Committee of IFHRO (1992).
  Staff from the medical record department and the WHO Collaborating Centre for ICD Classification at PUMC Hospital and teachers in the Chongwen Health School translated the materials into Chinese and added some forms to reflect the practical situation of hospitals in China. The materials have been revised twice since. Thus the first formal HIM teaching materials were available in China.
  In 1996, after going abroad to learn about health information management at the School of HIM, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, a teacher of Chongwen Health School compiled the English teaching material, English for HIM Students. Both sets of teaching materials are used by most of the schools offering HIM education in China.
  In 1993, the Branch of Medical Care, in the Medicine and Medical Care Department, common middle occupational education, Ministry of Education, People’s Republic of China, listed Medical Record Education as a category of educational occupations. It was changed to Health Information Management in 2000. The registration number is 040109, which symbolises that HIM education formally became one of the occupations recognised by the Chinese Health Ministry.
  In 1993, two teachers from Chongwen Health School were invited by Professor Phyllis Watson to visit the School of HIM, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, as visiting scholars. They studied at the school for one year, and were the first teachers from China to gain formal HIM accreditation.
  Before 1994, there were few people who knew the term health information management in China. Since then, however, many articles on HIM have been published in magazines and in congress proceedings, and health information management is now recognised as a profession in China instead of medical record management, as is HIM education.
  In medical circles, many experts and medical workers now realise that medical records are not only important for the care and treatment of patients, and for teaching and research, but that the medical record also has many more uses.
  In October 1997, the Medical Record Education Committee of the Chinese Medical Record Association was established during the seventh academic conference on Medical Record Management, in Lushan, Jiangxi Province. This meant that medical record/health information management education now had a team of educators in China. Committee
members meet to compile curricula, develop syllabuses, discuss teaching methods and train teachers, thus giving new schools that initiate HIM education programs the opportunity to learn from others instead of having to teach themselves.

The introduction of higher HIM education
At the beginning of the new century, the first higher HIM education course in China was developed. The dream of the experts of HIM nationally and internationally came true. The HIM class was established in the Capital Medical University and the first students enrolled in 2000. The students were graduates from senior middle schools and passed the national examination. After three years in the program, they will reach Associate Bachelor degree level. During the three years, the students will study:

- English
- Chinese writing
- computer science and network technology
- higher mathematics
- anatomy
- pharmacy (brief)
- histology and embryology
- pathological microbiology
- physiology
- pathological anatomy
- medical statistics
- clinical medicine (brief)
- otorhinolaryngology
- ophthalmology
- traditional Chinese medicine
- epidemiology
- clinical laboratory (brief)
- medical literature searching
- basic health management
- law relating to health care
- health information management
- classification of diseases and procedures, and
- medical economics.

The present situation of health information management in China
At present, there are 16,000 hospitals above county level and 60,000 hospitals under the control of the public health ministry. According to the size of the hospitals and number of beds, the numbers of medical record workers in the medical record departments vary – from 3-5 in a small hospital to about 40 in a big hospital. Roughly, there are about 120,000 people working in medical record departments in China. Only a few have received professional education at a middle level school and none have received higher HIM education. However, a policy that hospitals will not receive graduates from secondary technical schools in 2003 has been introduced in Beijing, which means that most HIM graduates at middle level will not find jobs. If they want to find a job as a medical record officer in hospitals, they must undertake higher education.

The need to develop HIM education in China
Now is a good time for the development of the HIM profession and its education. There are two main reasons:

- one is that health care insurance will be implemented nationwide;
- the second is that China has become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

With the implementation of a national health care insurance system, it is hoped that a perfect reimbursement system will be established. Accordingly, a great number of health information professionals will be required to meet the needs (eg, health information managers will be needed to code every medical case by Diagnosis Related Groups [DRGs] in the hospitals, and also check the insurance company records to ensure every reimbursement is reasonable). Thus a number of qualified and higher-educated HIM professionals are needed. Otherwise, health care insurance will lose its base.

Last year, China joined the WTO and, as a member, the health care market should be opened to the world. The health care industry must follow the regulations, which ask the HIM profession in China to develop a perfect HIM system. The system should be developed and maintained by qualified and higher-educated professionals.

From this, it can be concluded that a great number of qualified and highly educated professionals are needed by China, and the only way to provide this kind of professional is to develop more higher HIM education programs.

Difficulties in developing higher HIM education in China
It is true that there are many difficulties in the way of developing higher HIM education in China. There are two practical factors that affect the development of such education:

- one is the lack of experience in China in running HIM education at a higher level, and
- the other is the lack of teachers, especially professional teachers, as the profession has not been paid the attention it should have been to help develop HIM educators at a higher level.

HIM education at middle level cannot provide qualified teachers for either college level or fulfill the needs of qualified HIM professionals. Certainly, there is no Master of HIM Education degree that provides qualified teachers of HIM in China. Although the first HIM class at higher level has been established, it is far from fulfilling the current need. Higher Chinese HIM education needs the guidance and cooperation from developed countries, as well as teachers and experienced program managers. Running higher HIM education in alliance with internationally famous universities would be a good solution. This would include inviting teachers from other countries to China, running higher HIM education as a joint venture, etc.
Solution
It is clear that higher HIM education is badly needed in China, as the market is so great that it can never be over-estimated, and qualified HIM professionals are not only needed in hospital medical record departments, but also by a variety of professions and institutions. As stated, there are presently about 60,000 hospitals of different size levels and more than 120,000 workers engaged in medical record departments in China. If only a percentage of them received higher education, how many schools of HIM should there be? The population of the USA is more than 270 million and there are about 130 universities that provide HIM education in that country. The population of China is 1.3 billion, so how many schools of HIM are needed in China?

The solution is to develop higher HIM education in China, and to do it with the collaboration of colleagues around the world.

References

Yan Shufan
Retired Lecturer
HIM Programme, Chongwen Health School
Beijing, China