Health Information Management in epidemiological research

Angela Randall

First, all of us at the HIMAA National Board would like to extend our warmest congratulations to Associate Professor Johanna Westbrook on her election as an International Fellow to the American College of Medical Informatics. You will read more about Johanna’s award in this issue.

Our roles as Health Information Managers (HIMs) are becoming increasingly diverse and comprehensive. These developments are reflected in articles published in this issue of the Journal, in which a range of research, epidemiological and clinical studies are discussed in relation to Health Information Management, and the involvement of HIMs in health data management is explored.

Management of epidemiological and research data is often the task of a Health Information Manager, and that leads me to consider the concept of data management itself. Data management can be defined as the ability to translate a study design into an effective data collection instrument which is one of the most important aspects of preparing a clinical research protocol. Other aspects of data management particularly relevant to those HIMs interested in a career in research and epidemiological studies, include knowledge of the relevant statutory guidelines on research, a sound knowledge of statistical methods and, increasingly, the issues of privacy legislation — in particular, the impact of new technologies on privacy. Finally, we need to understand the role and responsibilities of human ethics committees in research and epidemiological studies.

Merilyn Riley demonstrates the use of the skills described above in her discussion of the methodology used in collecting data related to birth defects and maternal mortality for the Victorian Perinatal Data Collection. Riley demonstrates the need not only for accurate, reliable and timely reporting of data, but also for HIMs in general to enhance their research skills and improve their statistical knowledge for use in the research field. The Victorian Birth Defects Register referred to in this article was established in response to an epidemiological study of congenital anomalies.

Andrew Miller, on the other hand, spells out the need for verifiable source data. Whilst acknowledging the importance of paper-based medical records, he also recognises the exciting possibilities of the electronic environment and its impact on future research capabilities, along with the challenges presented to the gatherers of information (HIMs). In his article, Miller explores the role of the radiation oncologist and the overlap of epidemiological data collecting with those respective gatherers of information.

Quoc Nguyen and Beth Reid employ a comparative study technique to examine the results of a 6-year study of fungaemia, utilising discharge data in two major Sydney hospitals. This article demonstrates not only the involvement but also the ability of a Health Information Manager to research and present the findings in an appropriate journal format. The techniques and skills required for research of this type are achieved through constant work in the research field, and include the ability to calculate the study sample population through statistical calculations.

Michelle Bramley discusses the importance of evaluation in evidence-based policy and planning of health services, and the importance of health classifications of those systems.

As Health Information Managers, we utilise our skills in health classification daily, and find that the resultant product is a usable health database in which many items of service are incorporated into morbidity and mortality data collections ready for use in research and epidemiological studies, health promotion, and the prediction of population health.

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