

Best documentation practices for diagnosis coding

The “Evaluation and Management Services Guide” issued by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) advises providers as follows:

“Clear and concise medical record documentation is critical to providing patients with quality care and is required for you to receive accurate and timely payment for furnished services. Medical records chronologically report the care a patient received and record pertinent facts, findings, and observations about the patient’s health history. Medical record documentation helps physicians and other healthcare professionals evaluate and plan the patient’s immediate treatment and monitor the patient’s healthcare over time.”

Medical record documentation of patient diagnoses that is clear, concise and described to the highest level of specificity facilitates:

- Quality patient care with better outcomes
- Accurate diagnosis code assignment
- Appropriate and timely healthcare provider payment for furnished services

Key points

Legibility

The entire medical record must be legible. Remember this basic rule: If it is not documented, it was not done. Likewise, if it is not legible, it cannot be read. If it cannot be read, it cannot be proven that the diagnoses are supported and that appropriate medical services were performed. An illegible record is of no use in assigning diagnosis codes or determining the medical services performed.

Patient demographics

Each page of the medical record should include, at a minimum, the date of service and the patient’s name and date of birth. Also include the patient identification number, if applicable.

Page numbering

Each page for each date of service should be numbered.

Best practice

- Page 1 of 3
- Page 2 of 3
- Page 3 of 3

If pages are numbered in this way, it will be clear to an objective reviewer whether the record for a particular date is complete. If the printed pages are inadvertently separated, this page numbering system allows the medical record to be easily reassembled in proper order.

Healthcare provider signature and credentials

- Only authorized personnel may document in the medical record.
- The medical record for each encounter must document the date of service and must be signed in a timely manner by the rendering provider.
- The signature method used shall be a handwritten or electronic signature. Stamped signatures are not acceptable. (CMS allows stamped signatures only when the provider can

show proof of a physical disability that renders the provider unable to sign the record.)

- Signatures must be clearly identified by a printed, legible provider name and credentials.

Reference: CMS Medicare Program Integrity Manual (Publication [Pub.] 100-08), Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2.4

Abbreviations and acronyms

- Limit the use of abbreviations and acronyms or avoid them altogether.
- Use only industry-standard abbreviations and acronyms.
- Keep in mind that some standard abbreviations and acronyms have multiple meanings. The meaning of the abbreviation or acronym often can be determined based on context, but this is not always true.

Best practice

- *The initial notation of a diagnosis should be spelled out in full with the abbreviation in parentheses, such as “myocardial infarction (MI)” or “rheumatoid arthritis (RA).”*
- *Subsequent mention of the condition can be made using the abbreviation.*
- *The diagnosis should again be spelled out in full in the final impression or plan.*

Dates and timelines

Specific dates and timelines provide important information and can affect diagnosis code assignment (see second bullet below regarding myocardial infarction).

- Post-hospitalization or post-operative follow-up office visits:

Vague: “Patient is here for hospital follow-up.”

Specific: “Patient was discharged from the hospital on 1/15/20xx after admission for an exacerbation of congestive heart failure.”

Vague: “Post-op visit for recent splenectomy.”

Specific: “Patient is here for first post-op visit after splenectomy performed on 3/25/20xx.”

- “Recent” myocardial infarction (MI) is a vague description that does not specify whether the date on which the patient experienced an acute myocardial infarction was equal to or less than four weeks prior to the date of the current encounter (coded as acute MI) versus the myocardial infarction that is older than four weeks with no current symptoms (coded as historical MI).

Vague: “Follow-up office visit for recent myocardial infarction.”

Specific: “Patient was discharged from ABC Medical Center on 2/25/20xx after inpatient admission for acute myocardial infarction.”

Historical versus current

- Do not use the descriptor “history of” to describe a current or chronic condition that is still present, active or ongoing. In diagnosis coding, “history of” means conditions occurred in the past and is no longer a current problem.
- Do not use the descriptor “history of” to describe a current condition that is in remission. Describe the condition as “in remission.”

- Do not document a condition as current if it is historical only.
Consider this example:

A patient with a history of prostate cancer that has been eradicated in the past presents to the office for an evaluation, examination and six month follow-up PSA (prostate-specific antigen) lab test to monitor for prostate cancer recurrence.

- The assessment section should not state “prostate cancer,” but rather “history of prostate cancer.”
- The related plan would be best stated as “continue to monitor PSA every six months to check for prostate cancer recurrence.”

Consistency

Use caution when using record templates or electronic health records (EHRs) that might introduce conflicting or contradictory information. Many EHR systems default to “normal” values that may conflict with previous “abnormal” entries.

Examples of conflicting or contradictory documentation include:

- The final assessment states right hemiparesis due to prior cerebrovascular accident (CVA), but the neurologic review of systems (ROS) and detailed neurologic examination are noted as completely normal.
- The chief complaint states the patient presents for evaluation of chest pain, and the final assessment states acute angina. However, the review of systems states, “Patient denies any episodes of chest pain.”
- The office notes refer to the patient as both “he” and “she.”

Specificity

Avoid vague diagnosis descriptions, e.g., “other” or “unspecified.” Describe each final diagnosis to the highest level of specificity, such as:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| • With or without exacerbation | • Controlled or uncontrolled |
| • With or without complications | • Underlying cause |
| • Acute, chronic, acute-on-chronic | • Associated conditions |
| • Severity – mild, moderate, severe | • Location or site, including laterality and specific site with a body part (upper outer quadrant, lower inner quadrant, etc.), distal, proximal, etc. |
| • Stages or types | |

Specificity examples:

Chronic kidney disease (CKD)

- Specify stage I-V or end-stage renal disease (ESRD)
- Even if lab values and/or the glomerular filtration rate (GFR) are documented, the record must still clearly specify the stage of CKD. Medical coders are not allowed to clinically interpret the GFR to code a stage of CKD that is not specifically documented in the medical record.

Neoplasms – Specify:

- Site(s), including location within a body part (e.g., lower outer quadrant of right breast)
- Clear specification of which site is primary and which sites are secondary
- Histologic type (adenocarcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, etc.) or behavior (benign, malignant, uncertain, etc.)
- Date of diagnosis with treatment chronology
- Current status and response to treatment, for example:
 - Resolved
 - In remission
 - Undergoing adjuvant therapy (specify whether curative, palliative or prophylactic/preventive)

Diabetes mellitus (DM)

- Specify type (Type 1, Type 2, secondary to – state the causal condition)
- Include status of diabetes control, as in “well controlled” or “uncontrolled due to hyperglycemia”
Note: ICD-10-CM considers “uncontrolled” to be a diabetic complication and requires the physician to specify “uncontrolled” as either hyperglycemia or hypoglycemia. Without this specification, a diagnosis code cannot be assigned, as the ICD-10-CM manual does not provide a code for diabetes stated as simply “uncontrolled.”
- Document with or without complications and (fully describe each complication).
 - Complications should be clearly and directly linked to diabetes through use of linking terms such as “due to,” “secondary to,” “associated with,” “related to.”
Best practice: Document *each* complication of diabetes with the descriptor “diabetic,” as in “Type 2 diabetes mellitus with diabetic neuropathy and diabetic retinopathy.”
 - Avoid use of punctuation marks (e.g., slashes and commas) to separate conditions in a list of diabetic complications, as this may not clearly indicate a causal relationship.

Note: Ensure the medical record does not document diabetes as both *with* and *without* complications. This contradiction can occur when the EHR allows the provider to document a final diagnosis by choosing an ICD-10-CM code with description from a drop-down menu. For example:

E11.9 Type 2 diabetes mellitus without complications

E11.42 Type 2 diabetes mellitus with diabetic polyneuropathy

Note: The ICD-10-CM classification presumes cause-and-effect linkage between diabetes and certain conditions unless the physician specifically indicates the conditions are not related. Conditions that appear in the alphabetic index as indented subterms under the various types of “Diabetes, with” are coded as diabetic complications, even in the absence of physician documentation explicitly linking them, unless the documentation clearly indicates these conditions are not caused by diabetes – for example, by stating:

- The actual nondiabetes-related cause
- The cause is not diabetes
- Diabetes is without complications
- The cause is unknown

For more information related to coding these and other conditions, see CarePlus’ condition-specific coding guidelines.

Confirmed versus uncertain

Avoid use of terms that imply uncertainty (such as “probable,” “apparently,” “likely” or “consistent with”) to describe diagnoses or conditions that are confirmed. Rather, document the signs and symptoms in the absence of a confirmed diagnosis.

Status conditions

Document status conditions when applicable (e.g., ostomy status, dialysis status, amputation status, major organ transplant).

Final diagnostic statement

The assessment (a.k.a. impression) section in a medical record is the section in which the healthcare provider documents each of the patient’s final diagnoses based on all information gathered as the patient was evaluated on an individual date of service. There should be only one final assessment and it should document to the highest level of specificity all of the following:

- A final diagnostic statement for all conditions or diagnoses evaluated and managed during the encounter
- All comorbid or coexisting conditions that impacted patient care, treatment or management for that encounter
- Status of each condition that currently exists (not historical), such as improved, stable, worsening, in remission, etc. Documentation of a condition without a status does not always clearly indicate whether the condition is current versus historical.

Electronic health record (EHR) issues

Other and unspecified codes with descriptions:

Some EHRs insert ICD-10-CM codes with descriptions into the medical record to represent the final diagnosis. For example:

“I42.8, Other cardiomyopathies”

“I42.9 Cardiomyopathy, unspecified”

These are vague descriptions and incomplete diagnoses.

- Codes titled “other” or “other specified” are for use when the medical record provides a specific diagnosis description for which a specific code does not exist. The “other” ICD-10-CM code with description should not be used, by itself, as a final diagnosis without clear documentation that specifies the particular “other” condition.
- Unspecified diagnosis descriptions should be used only when sufficient clinical information is not known or available to the provider at the time of the encounter.

Mismatch between final diagnostic statement and EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description

Another scenario that causes confusion is one in which the assessment section documents a provider-stated diagnosis *plus* an EHR-inserted ICD-10-CM with description that does not match – or may even contradict – the stated diagnosis. For example:

Assessment: **Ischemic cardiomyopathy**

I42.Ø Dilated cardiomyopathy

Here the final diagnosis **in bold** in the Assessment is “Ischemic cardiomyopathy”, which codes to 125.5. The EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description that follows, however, is I42.Ø, Dilated cardiomyopathy. This causes confusion regarding which diagnosis is correct. Often documentation found elsewhere in the record does not provide clarity.

To avoid confusion and ensure accurate diagnosis code assignment, the provider’s final diagnosis must either match the code with description, or it must classify in ICD-10-CM to the EHR-inserted diagnosis code with description.

Note: ICD-10-CM is a statistical classification; it is not a substitute for a healthcare provider’s final diagnostic statement. It is the healthcare provider’s responsibility to provide legible, clear and concise documentation of each final diagnosis described to the highest level of specificity, which is then translated to an ICD-10-CM code for reporting purposes. It is not appropriate for healthcare providers to simply list a code number or select a code number from a list of codes in place of a written final diagnosis.

Supporting documentation

The medical record should provide supporting documentation for each condition or diagnosis listed, such as:

- Related signs and symptoms and physical exam findings.
- Results of diagnostic testing, including the physician's interpretation with indication of the clinical significance.
- Medication lists should document the drug name, dosage with times and/or frequency and clear linkage to the condition(s) for which the drug has been prescribed.
- For chronic conditions that have impact on patient care, treatment and management but are being followed by a different healthcare provider, supporting documentation would be a simple notation to that effect. Example, "Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), followed by Dr. Smith, pulmonologist."

Treatment plan

The current plan of treatment for each diagnosis should be clearly documented and specific.

- Examples include dietary recommendations, medication changes, orders for diagnostic testing, specific patient education or counseling provided, continued monitoring and other factors that affect diagnosis.
- If referrals are made or consultations requested, the office note should indicate to whom or where the referral or consultation is made or from whom consultation advice is requested.
- Document when the patient will be seen again, even if on an as-needed basis only.

Problem lists

Problem lists are a common element in medical records, especially EHRs. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted definition of the naming, content or use of a problem list across all healthcare providers. Problem lists may contain both active and historical conditions, but they are not equivalent to a past medical history or final assessment/plan. The problem list should be maintained and updated by the healthcare provider to avoid confusion and questions about the status of the conditions in the list, and possibly the medical record as a whole.

Best practice

- *Each condition on a problem list should be evaluated separately by the examining healthcare provider.*
- *Documentation should reflect the evaluation, monitoring and/or treatment for each condition.*

Late entries and addenda

Changes to a medical record after the office visit is completed must comply with one of these two types of entries:

1. Late entries
 - Should be used for simple corrections to the original note, made within approximately 24 to 72 hours after providing service and before the claim is filed
 - Should be used for purposes of clarification, error correction or the addition of information not initially available
 - Should be dated and timed
 - Should be written only if the person documenting has total recall of the omitted information
2. Addenda
 - Should address additional clinically relevant information; not information just to meet regulatory requirements
 - Should be used for information that was present at the time of the visit, but not available to the physician at the time of the original entry

- Should clearly identify content as separate from the original entry
- Should be timely (30 days is accepted)
- Needs to include the signature of the original healthcare provider and date
- Should include the reason for the addition or clarification

A final note

Industry-standard diagnosis coding guidelines require medical coders to apply a strict literal interpretation to the healthcare provider's medical record documentation. Coders are not allowed to "connect the dots," make assumptions or presume to know the healthcare provider's intent. Coders cannot clinically interpret information within the record, such as diagnostic test results or physical exam findings, to assign a code for a diagnosis that is not documented in the record. Accurate diagnosis code assignment is dependent on the healthcare provider clearly describing each medical diagnosis to the highest level of specificity.

References:

- American Hospital Association (AHA) Coding Clinic
- ICD-10-CM Official Guidelines for Coding and Reporting
- CMS Medicare Program Integrity Manual