Up to Code: RCCB's Certification Exam Recognizes Deserving Radiology Coders

Radiology certified coders give employers confidence that their code submissions are accurate and in compliance with Medicare guidelines. Encourage your coders to become Radiology Certified Coders. For years, radiology coders lacked the kind of certification program enjoyed by other clinical specialties. But over the last 10 years, the Radiology Coding Certification Board (RCCB) has recognized over 1000 coders.

Excerpts from the July/August 2005 ACR Radiology Coding Source by Richard Duszak, Jr., MD, FACR, RCC

Radiology practices should view the Radiology Coding Certification Board (RCCB) examination as an opportunity to improve their coding and billing operations and for coders to demonstrate their level of professionalism. In professional circles that bestow it, certification is a clear indicator of merit, a bold stamp of approval from a respected body of your peers. And just as those few letters behind your job title can open doors that would otherwise have remained shut, the absence of certification can have the damning effect of an invisible scarlet letter, branding you as mediocre (or worse).

Feedback from coders, physicians and practices has been favorable, with most candidates saying that the RCCB examination is comprehensive, rigorous and fair. Many have reported that their employers wholeheartedly support their credentialing efforts, and some have reported salary raises following certification. Physicians with employees who have passed the examination report an added sense of security and comfort, knowing that competent individuals are performing their billing operations.

Incorporated in 2000 as an independent not-for-profit organization, the RCCB evolved from the strategic planning efforts of the Radiology Business Management Association (RBMA), which identified a need to recognize the education and expertise of radiology coders. Since coding is an integral component of professional reimbursement and regulatory compliance, planners and board members have strived to create a rigorous and comprehensive examination to ensure the highest quality of professionals. The board consists of six recognized experts in various aspects of radiology practice management, coding, reimbursement and compliance.
Examinations for 2011 are slated for May, July, September and November at various locations nationwide. Click here to see a location near you.

Exam Content

The exam features multiple-choice questions in a typical standardized test format. Content areas were determined by a survey of radiology practices and professional coders, and detailed on the RCCB Web site (www.rccb.org). The major topics and their approximate weighting are:

- 20% International Classification of Diseases-9th Edition (ICD-9)
- 20% Anatomy and Terminology
- 10% Ethics, Compliance, Administrative and HIPAA

The RCCB prepared the exam with input from nationally recognized coding consultants and staff, as well as from the ACR leadership. The entire testing process was designed and reviewed by national testing experts.

Why Bother?

The concept of independent competency verification is hardly new to the medical profession. For years, physicians have pursued courses of studies and examinations that designate them as "board certified." Such designations serve as a seal of approval to the public and are now available for numerous non-physician medical professionals.

The pursuit of such recognition carries a price: Exam preparation can be grueling, and professionals must be willing to take time away from work and pay for the examination and travel. These obstacles, however, are minor for most professionals, who consider such sacrifices a small price to pay for independent recognition of their competency.

Below are four reasons why physicians seek board certification—and reasons why their coders should be supported as they do the same:

1. Board-certified physicians perform better. Literature supports the perception that board-certified doctors are superior physicians. They performed better in medical school and residency than noncertified physicians¹ and will likely do so in practice. By extension, certified coders should also demonstrate better performance. While no one knows how
frequently coding errors occur in diagnostic radiology, coding error rates are as high as 25 percent for non-radiology procedures and interventional radiology services. Accordingly, practices should ensure that only qualified individuals handle their coding affairs.

2. Board-certified physicians are more active in professional organizations. Board-certified physicians are more likely to maintain professional society membership, which means they're more likely to attend meetings and interact with colleagues nationally—increasing the likelihood that these physicians will remain current in their education. Coders who make the commitment to obtain board certification will likely make the same commitment to long-term professional development—a step that clearly benefits the radiology practice.

3. Board-certified physicians may have less liability exposure. In the current litigious environment, all professionals risk exposure for their professional work. Although nothing absolutely protects physicians from lawsuits, board-certified physicians are less likely to be sued than their noncertified colleagues. Legal risk might be similarly reduced when coders obtain board certification. Coding and billing compliance is important to every radiology practice, and independently certified coders may reduce a practice's coding error rate and the legal exposure a practice might otherwise face during an audit.

4. Patients prefer board-certified physicians. Patients prefer board-certified doctors for several reasons. Everyone wants a hired professional (regardless of occupation) to be competent, and board certification helps ensure that competency. The same applies for coders: All other things being equal, a certified coder is more likely to engender confidence than one who hasn't achieved that distinction.

The Right Move

While it requires many sacrifices, certification also rewards the coder with invaluable recognition. All patients want their doctors to be board certified, and everyone knows that board-certified doctors are better physicians. Shouldn't the same hold true for coders?

For more information on the Radiology Coding Certification Board examination, visit the RCCB Web site at www.rccb.org.

References


Richard Duszak Jr., M.D., is a diagnostic and interventional radiologist with Mid-South Imaging and Therapeutics in Memphis, TN. He served on the board of directors of the Radiology Coding Certification Board and is past-chairman of the RCCB's Education Committee. Duszak is currently a member of the AMA's CPT Editorial Panel and the ACR's Committee on Coding and Nomenclature.