

Health-care industry growth sparks need for clerical workers

By Tara Marion

Those experienced with job placement say qualified clerical workers are in demand in medical offices and other health-care facilities.

“The whole market is really a dog-eat-dog world,” said Marianna Perrin, human resource assistant at Michigan Health Partners, a Bronson Healthcare Group subsidiary, in Kalamazoo, who went on to explain that the job market is so competitive because there are a lot of open positions but not enough workers to fill them.

Health care has become one of the fastest-growing industries in the United States. Because of this growth, qualified file clerks, medical transcriptionists, billing specialists, front-desk receptionists and medical secretaries are in demand. Educated and experienced clerical workers have specialized skills that are highly respected.

▪ FILE CLERK

File clerks maintain the confidentiality of patient records. They pull and file patient charts for appointments and subsequently file progress reports, x-ray results and correspondence.

To do so, they need to be able to file alphabetically and numerically. “A lot of times that’s all cross-referenced for confidentiality, so we try to make sure that a person has those skills,” said Darlene Slack, area manager of Monday Staffing, in Kalamazoo.

File clerks also need to be able to use a copy machine to duplicate dictated reports for release to other physicians. Physically, Perrin said the ability to sit and stoop for long periods of time is important.

▪ MEDICAL TRANSCRIPTIONIST

Physicians see patients in hospitals, clinics and private practices. They dictate important information about histories, physical examinations, diseases, procedures, laboratory tests and diagnoses. Medical transcriptionists translate this information into detailed patient records.

Physicians talk in technical terms, so medical transcriptionists must be able to understand medical terminology. They also need to be able to type at at least 70 words per minute.

If you are not sure if this is the right career for you, Perrin explained that the type of person who makes a successful transcriptionist. “Someone who’s very detail oriented, doesn’t need to be with people and can work alone—someone who is willing to sit at a computer for many hours at a time.”

▪ BILLING SPECIALIST

Physicians provide services to patients and want reimbursement for what they do. The medical reimbursement process includes descriptions of procedures and services the physician provides, which are represented by a system of numbered codes. Medical specialists use CPT-4 and ICD-9 coding with Medic software to send information to insurance companies.

Additional tasks include tracking and following-up on claims, explaining insurance benefits to patients and office bookkeeping. Medical billing requires an eye for detail. "They make a lot of corrections, whether it's wrong insurance, patient information or coding," said Perrin, who spoke from experience. Front-desk receptionists often evolve into billing specialists.

- **FRONT-DESK RECEPTIONIST**

A receptionist is responsible for the day-to-day operations of a medical office, from answering the telephone, scheduling appointments and greeting patients to maintaining records if there is no file clerk. Communicating effectively with patients is just as important as these front-desk procedures.

"Just think if you're registering person going into the hospital who may be scared to death because they could have cancer," Slack said. "It's just being very nice to that person, having a warm heart, excellent customer-service skills and patience."

With all of these tasks, front-desk receptionists need to be able to see the big picture. "They have patients checking in and out, so they need to be able (to check) somebody in, answer the phone and make sure that the medical assistant gets the correct forms," she explained.

- **MEDICAL SECRETARY**

Medical secretaries differ from front-desk receptionists in that they concentrate on administrative office procedures.

They write referral, second-opinion and follow-up letters and fill out disability and worker's compensation forms. If a physician is involved in a legal matter, they are also responsible for that correspondence. For that reason, writing, typing and computer skills are very important for medical secretaries, who usually have a secretarial degree.

If the front-desk receptionists don't answer the phone, the medical secretaries will do it for them. They can also fill in for other staff members if needed. "They do things that need to be done right away," Perrin explained.

- **EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY**

Whether you're just out of high school or looking for a career change, a career as a file clerk, medical transcriptionist, billing specialist, front-desk receptionist or medical secretary is an excellent opportunity to join the health-care industry.

To develop medical skills for the medical field, classes and diploma programs are offered at many community colleges and vocational schools.

"I think there are people out there, but maybe they just do not have the skills that are needed," Slack said. Added Perrin, "It's really hard to find good workers because they (already) have jobs, so the education and experience is key when you find somebody."