

Medical Scribes

BY

Kristin Hagen, CPHIT,
CPEHR, CPHIE, AHDI-F



Open Letter Series
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Dear Colleagues,

With so much facing our industry today, it can be easy to wonder just where we'll "land" when all of the change we've been hearing about has finished reshaping our profession. Will we still be transcribing as we always have? Will we be editing? Or will we move on to other hybrid roles we cannot yet imagine or contemplate?

I can speak confidently on behalf of the AHDI Board of Directors when I say, *We hear your concerns*. We know that such an era of transition in our sector can lend itself to conjecture and no small amount of fear about the future. Certainly no one can predict it. We know that MTs are facing significant "climate change" when it comes to job security, compensation, competing technologies, and the pressures of a global marketplace, and we know career change decisions are never easy, especially when those decisions involve investing precious resources into advanced training, credentialing, and learning new roles.

That is why we are launching this open letter series – to tackle some of the tougher issues facing our sector today. It is our hope to shed light on how the association has chosen to navigate many of these challenges, to share our personal stories about these issues, and to engage you in further contemplative dialogue on these subjects as we work together to find solutions for our industry. We'll be posting these open letters throughout the next few months, followed by interactive dialogue on these issues in the AHDI Lounge, an open Town Hall meeting on a monthly basis, and a live collegiate-style debate on these topics at our Annual Convention & Expo in Phoenix later this year. We hope you will join us for the journey.

So let's start with a controversial topic that recently set our Lounge blog ablaze with debate – *medical scribes*. References to medical scribes are suddenly popping up all over the place, and many of us were likely caught off guard when we first learned that...yes...an entirely new documentation profession had sprung up rather over night, one that now demands our consideration and attention. Who are they? What do they do? Do scribes represent a competing or complementary interest for our sector?

Let's begin with some basics.

What is the background of a medical scribe?

Scribes have been around since the early biblical days.¹ Today scribes are commonly referred to as Clinical Information Managers. The primary function of a scribe is the creation and maintenance of the patient's medical record, which is created under the supervision of the attending physician. The scribe documents the patient's history and story through direct observation of the physician's interaction with the patient as well as the procedures performed, the results of laboratory studies, and other ancillary information gathered at the point of care. Scribes follow the workflow of the patient(s) under the direct care of the physician.

What are current scribing trends and models?

Medical scribes have commonly been deployed into emergency departments to provide real-time supportive services to busy emergency room physicians by documenting clinical patient

encounters as they occur through direct data entry into the EHR. They serve as a right hand to the ER physician in capturing the care encounter while also coordinating the presentation of diagnostic data to assist the physician with clinical decision-making.

There are various levels of scribe training programs from local to national organizations designed to create efficiencies within the US healthcare system. The demand has traditionally been filled with eager pre-medical students, learning first-hand about the workflow patterns and patient care they will deliver in the future. As a medical scribe, the role is focused on creating comprehensive and complete medical records and eliminating some duplication of tests. The base education has been set around medical scenarios, case management, disease processes, medical terminology, anatomy and physiology, coding, and other biological processes. Scribes are pre-screened for the selection process.

What are the skill set requirements and training required to become a medical scribe?

Medical scribes may be trained on site or through affordable online distance education programs. Skill sets include strong English grammar, a compelling interest in healthcare and patient improvement, a strong desire to work in a clinical setting, superior analytical and resource skills, understanding and training in enabling technologies (with computer and keyboarding skills), an understanding of information workflow, attention to detail, keen listening skills, and strong multi-tasking abilities. A scribe, by design, is a self-starter who works well in a variety of different settings and paces and follows directions well. The medical scribe is the physician's assistant and is continuously utilizing a strategic thought process. The individual also has a desire to work within a team of allied healthcare personnel. Together the physician and the scribe partner to create a comprehensive and meaningful care encounter record. Scribes are also expected to be well-versed in HIPAA and regulatory compliance, and like MTs, scribes have a steep learning curve, with clinical shadowing required in the post training phase.

How does medical scribing connect to the broader documentation spectrum and other health information management (HIM) roles?

Medical scribes are a central liaison within any healthcare facility, surgical center, or emergency department. They uniquely interact and collaborate with other members of the healthcare team, tracking patient information, including ancillary departments of laboratory and radiology departments. Medical scribes adapt to technological needs of the facility, understand the basis of electronic record systems, coding practices and levels, medical decision-making, and the disposition of the patient. Medical scribes fill a need identified by market demands. Physicians focus on the patient, documentation is tracked and delivered in real time, and documentation is available at the point of care, as defined by our healthcare system.

Could this be a stepping stone for medical transcriptionists and others in the medical transcription field? Is this an alternate career path for medical transcriptionists?

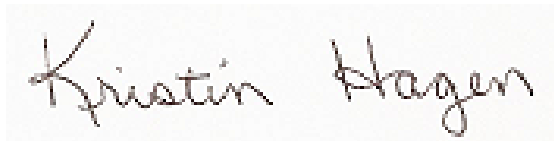
There are similarities and distinct differences between medical transcriptionist and medical scribes, as are there in comparing these roles with any other health information management role. Just as medical scribes would need additional training to transition to the unique

application of a traditional transcription skill, with some additional training in specialized applications, medical transcriptionists would also be uniquely qualified to fill the roles open in the emerging and growing field of scribes. One thing is certain. National mandates and incentives will increase the adoption of electronic medical records. Healthcare will need professionals who have a flexible resume of contributory skills applicable to an EHR-centric documentation setting. Scribing is a potential alternate documentation setting for medical transcriptionists. All allied healthcare personnel and career fields will continue to adapt, evolve, and emerge alongside medical transcriptionists, medical insurance specialists, health information managers, medical informatics, and other quality documentation analysts to blend roles and skill sets forming a sophisticated electronic network globally. Like all medical professions, continuing education is imperative for the well-being of the allied healthcare system.

Similar to medical transcription, medical scribing provides another career pathway, or stepping stone, to the broader healthcare system. Utilizing knowledge and skill sets through a variety of roles, the medical scribe is focused clinically, observing the patient's encounter, documenting alongside a team on site under the physician's care. Healthcare career opportunities are anticipated to grow, and these career fields offer a springboarding opportunity to other roles, as desired. The market will continue to adapt, evolve, and innovate, and we need to be prepared to do the same.

As a close observer of the scribe profession through new training programs, I can tell you that transcribing and scribing are neither competing nor complementary. They are quite unique, with some overlapping fundamental training but with divergent connection to technology and practical application. They are simply two of the many current and evolving roles available for those who seek a career in the documentation of healthcare encounters. It's a matter of choice and options – and depends greatly on the individual's preference for role, setting, and training.

We hope you will join us in the AHDI Lounge and at our upcoming Town Hall meetings to discuss these emerging roles in more detail. We are eager to hear from you!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kristin Hagen". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Kristin Hagen, CPHIT, CPHIE, CPEHR, AHDI-F
AHDI Director 2011

ⁱ 2011. *What is a Scribe*. David Reagan. <http://www.learnthebible.org/what-is-a-scribe.html>