

# University of Utah Health: Making the Case for Auditing CDI Queries

The University of Utah Health has taken a unique approach to CDI and determined that establishing standards and conducting query audits are critical components of the CDI process. Their experience shows the value of both internal and external query audits.

As the only academic medical center in the Intermountain West, University of Utah Health has a referral area encompassing more than 10% of the continental U.S. The healthcare system includes 4 hospitals, 10 neighborhood health centers, and 92 specialty clinics and serves over 1.4 million patients a year.

The organization has taken a unique approach in their coding and clinical documentation integrity program (CCDI) by incorporating inpatient coding and CDI functions into one team. The team includes a combination of both onsite and remote nurses and coders. Responsibilities are divided between the two roles and team members collaborate closely to get the best results.

## NURSES' RESPONSIBILITIES

- ☐ Perform clinical reviews
- ☐ Generate majority of queries
- ☐ Cover provider education / rounding

## CODERS' RESPONSIBILITIES

- ☐ Make all code assignments (working DRG, concurrent, discharge)
- ☐ Cover provider education on coding



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Michelle Knuckles, RHIT, the Inpatient (CCDI) Manager at the University of Utah Health, said of this model, "Getting the coders in there to do a comprehensive code assignment while the patient is still in-house allows us to identify PSI, HACs, and other query opportunities early in the game."

In 2010, after queries had been adopted into the legal health record (LHR) and moved to an electronic CDI information system, University of Utah Health CCDI leadership recognized the need for query audits. There was a definite opportunity for education as some queries were unclear as to what question was being asked; others lacked solid clinical indicators, treatment, and risk factors; and still others lacked basic writing skills.

## Internal Query Audit Process

Utah Health had already developed a solid process for auditing coders, but they had only done intermittent spot check audits on the queries. Knuckles requested assistance from Auditing & Education (A&E) Manager Nancy Treacy, MPH, RHIA, CDIP, to develop a comprehensive and meaningful query audit process. After researching best practices and various software options, Ms. Treacy decided a homegrown tool would be the most feasible and sustainable option. They set out to determine the best way to audit the 25 coders and 8 CDI nurses who were the query writers.

The first query audit tool included 21 weighted questions to be reviewed by the auditor. Questions included things like whether the query was warranted, if it was neat and free of typos, and whether specific document sources, including dates, were cited.

The tool was evaluated by gathering random samples from each writer and two A&E team members conducted independent, simultaneous audits to evaluate the objectivity of the new audit tool. The scores were then assessed for consistency.

The exercise revealed that the data points were not well defined. In addition, evaluating all 33 query writers was too broad a scope of work for just two internal auditors to achieve a statistically significant sample size. The decision was made to limit the query audits to the eight CDI nurses, as the coders were already being audited monthly on coding accuracy. Query audit prototype 2.0 was revised to be more concise, and the number of weighted elements were dropped from 21 to 13. The greatest emphasis was still placed on whether the query was warranted and if it was leading.

Though the 2.0 version of the query audit prototype was easier to use than the initial version, it still proved too complicated. Ultimately, the latest version of the prototype has been modified to the following five questions:

- ☐ Is the query warranted?
- ☐ Is the query non-leading in nature?
- ☐ Are the appropriate elements of the three-step query model\* incorporated?
- ☐ Is the query question appropriate?
- ☐ Are relevant and code-able answer options provided?

\* The two-step query model is specific to University of Utah Health and is used as the method for all CCDI query efforts.

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Throughout the development of the in-house query audit tool, CCDI and A&E leadership have also identified a number of audit challenges:

- ❑ An increased volume of audited records was required to attain a statistically significant sample size.
- ❑ A number of query templates were in need of revisions.
- ❑ There were difficulties with change management as the nurse query writers had never been audited and the internal auditors had high expectations.
- ❑ The audit tool needed further simplification.
- ❑ The preliminary findings of the internal audits needed external validation.

With these challenges identified, CCDI and A&E leadership decided to focus their efforts on gaining external validation of the results they had already begun collecting internally.

## External Query Audit Process

University of Utah Health chose Panacea as their trusted audit partner. Within three months, Panacea audited 240 queries—30 per CDI nurse—and also reviewed the CCDI query template and policies and guidelines. They also compared their external findings with the internal results, identifying areas for improvement in internal processes and focusing on elements needed to conform with industry best practices.

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Panacea’s audit considered factors in line with those identified throughout the development of University of Utah Health’s in-house audit tool:

- ❑ Is the query clear, concise, and understandable?
- ❑ Is the query non-leading?
- ❑ Is the query professional in appearance?
- ❑ Does the query include legitimate cited sources of documentation?
- ❑ Are there any missed query opportunities?

Ultimately, the external audit resulted in findings within six percentage points of the internal findings, validating the results of the Utah Health leadership team’s efforts. Missed query opportunities were discovered along with educational opportunities to correct leading queries; the use of bolded, colored, and italicized text; and challenges formulating clinically feasible options when only one exists.

“There is value in having internal findings validated externally,” said Ms. Knuckles. “We felt it was very worth the investment.”

## About University of Utah Health

University of Utah Health is the Mountain West's only academic health care system, combining excellence in patient care, the latest in medical research, and teaching to provide leading-edge medicine in a caring and personal setting. The system provides care for Utahans and residents of five surrounding states. University of Utah Health offers the latest technology and advancements, including some services available nowhere else in the region. As part of that system, University Hospitals & Clinics relies on more than 1,400 board-certified physicians and more than 5,000 health care professionals who staff four hospitals.

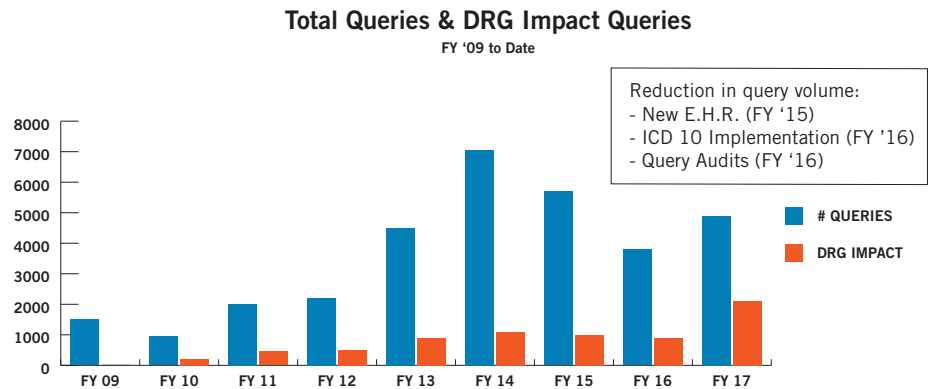
## About Panacea

Panacea, a Career Step company, helps healthcare organizations improve their bottom lines and strategic market positions with front-line expertise in revenue-cycle management, smart software, and enterprise-level educational solutions. Designed for the healthcare professionals responsible for financial performance or compliance, Panacea helps identify opportunities and overcome today's challenges, providing the clear answers needed to swiftly and cost-effectively achieve quality results.

If your organization is interested in learning how Panacea can support your CDI query audit or other revenue management efforts, contact us at 1-866-926-5933 or visit us online at [panaceainc.com](http://panaceainc.com) to schedule a complimentary demonstration.

## Value of the Query Audit Process and Lessons Learned

The University of Utah Health's leadership team feels that their query audit program has been a success. Query audit volume has started rebounding as the CDI query writers have improved and gained confidence:



Benefits of the query audit process have been seen across many areas:

- ☐ Increased query compliance
- ☐ A more professional look and feel across all queries
- ☐ Better identification of educational opportunities to improve queries
- ☐ Measured performance of job duties with statistical information that can be used for improvement and accountability
- ☐ Better query statistics
- ☐ Increased credibility with providers by providing a more consistent query experience
- ☐ Mitigated risk of denials

Ms. Knuckles summarized the University of Utah Health experience this way: "We want to emphasize that we found value in this query audit process. It was a long journey, not always easy, but it was valuable, so we encourage everyone to take the journey."

