Title

Physician perspectives on Z codes for social determinants of health screening

Abstract

Background

Health settings are experiencing increasing pressure to document social determinants of health (SDOH), yet the strategy to do so remains piecemeal. ICD-10 Z codes represent a novel opportunity to document SDOH, and are readily available in electronic medical records (EMRs) as part of billing codes– yet Z codes are rarely used. Little work has explored physician perspectives on the utility of Z Codes and an SDOH documentation tool.

Objective

To describe how physicians understand the use of Z codes in the context of social determinants of health assessment.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Inpatient and emergency department physicians at high Z-coding hospitals in New Jersey (n = 18). Qualitative analysis employed Deductive and inductive thematic content analysis.

Results

Social determinants were screened for, but individual history taking, medical specialty, hospital system and medical culture all influenced the screening process. Most often, SDOH came up in discharge planning but physicians recognized the challenge of encountering SDOH without adequate resources to address them. Physicians were unsure if they had used Z codes, and did not understand them as part of SDOH screening. Ultimately they determined they were applied if SDOH were documented on in the problem list or as part of the visit diagnoses, suggesting SDOH needed to be "diagnosed". They were

ultimately understood as billing codes to document complex medical plannings. Hozpital systems encouraged SDOH screening, but as a way to establish medical complexity for increased reimbursement.

Conclusion

Z codes are ubiquitous across electronic medical records and represent an opportunity to document SDOH across settings. Physicians suggest they are used primarily as billing codes document complex medical planning in the context of social needs, and drive higher reimbursement. Future work should consider how these codes can be used to implement and assess community health initiatives to address social needs.