

POSITION PAPER

Summary: The ACDIS advisory board believes that no one credential or licensure can guarantee success in the CDI profession, and that it is therefore limiting to restrict hiring practices to one type of candidate (i.e., RN vs. RHIA, etc.). A strong clinical foundation is necessary for success, but apart from that there are many knowledge-bases and “intangibles” that a CDI specialist must possess or develop. As a result the ACDIS advisory board advocates for diversity in hiring practices.

ACDIS is proud of the diversity within the CDI profession. Our membership and leadership boards include expertise from Health Information Management (HIM), revenue cycle, case management, and various nursing and medicine specialties. Many programs opt to staff their CDI departments with nurses, HIM/coding professionals, physicians and physician extenders, foreign medical graduates, and other allied health professionals. Each brings a different and unique “view,” including a different set of skills to the table. ACDIS believes this diversity makes CDI a stronger profession.

ACDIS recognized the multi-disciplinary nature of CDI when it identified the prerequisites to sit for the CCDS exam. The CCDS certification committee recognizes qualified exam applicants as possessing an RN, RHIA, RHIT, MD, or DO, with two years of experience as a concurrent or retrospective documentation specialist (note that there are other ways to qualify to sit for the CCDS exam; please see complete details at <https://acdis.org/certification/requirements>). CCDS certification tests the candidate’s knowledge of medical terminology, human anatomy, physiology, and disease processes. Since CDI is by name and nature “clinical,” a clinical foundation is necessary for success in this role.

However, in order to perform CDI responsibilities one must also become proficient in a number of adjacent knowledge domains including medical record review, medical coding and reimbursement regulations, the impact of reportable diagnoses on quality of care measures, risk adjustment methodology, and both the Inpatient Prospective Payment System (IPPS) and Outpatient Prospective Payment System (OPPS). Rare is the person who starts day one with all the required knowledge needed for this role.

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The demand for qualified CDI professionals is high: Healthcare is rapidly changing and organizations have realized the critical importance of CDI in providing support for their continued growth and success. With this high demand has come debate regarding what experience, credential, and/or licensure one must possess to serve as a CDI professional. Many organizations cite preferences for certain individuals and limit candidates based on their credentials or previous career path. ACDIS believes that it is self-limiting to exclude professionals that possess an RN, RHIA, RHIT, MD, or DO, etc., and the necessary experience. With diversity comes strength.

Credentials do not guarantee whether one will succeed as a CDI professional. Credentials merely identify the body of knowledge in which that person was originally trained. Prior bodies of knowledge certainly assist one's success, and credentials and/or licensure provide identification of one's stated profession and their level of education or achievement, but they do not ensure CDI competence. There are a number of necessary skills that cannot be ensured or captured by a credential. These include the following:

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- **Effective verbal and written communication.** To accomplish the many goals related to their role a CDI professional must communicate effectively with all members of the healthcare team, all levels of hospital administration, and of course with providers. This includes a demonstrated comfort level with speaking and knowledge-sharing, including proficiency in providing both informal and formal educational opportunities to all who document within the medical record.
- **Self-directed and with an ability to work independently to complete the work at hand.** These self-directed tasks include record reviews, physician queries, and analytics review.
- **The ability to think critically.** There are a number of definitions of critical thinking, but all describe an ability to process large amounts of information and to evaluate meaning with a rational, open mind based on the evidence at hand. A successful CDI will work to analyze data and apply thought to effectively communicate conclusions. This ability fosters collaboration amongst all professionals involved within the care team and the organization. The ACDIS Code of Ethics (<https://acdis.org/membership/ethics>) identifies the ability to *facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration in situations supporting CDI practice (see ethical principle no. 8)*

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- **A commitment to lifelong learning.** A CDI professional must demonstrate a desire and ability to investigate, question, interpret and apply his or her knowledge. Indeed, the ACDIS Code of Ethics identifies continuing education as a core principle: Clinical Documentation Improvement Specialists shall *advance their specialty knowledge and practice through continuing education, research, publications, and presentations*. See ethical principle no. 6. Knowledge of medical terminology, clinical conditions to include diagnostic criteria and standard treatment plans, and regulatory considerations to include compliant coding practices related to ICD-10 CM/PCS and CPT code assignment, MS-DRG assignment, the IPPS, the OPPS and CMS quality measures, are a must. This body of knowledge is ever expanding and evolving.

In conclusion, it is unlikely that any new CDI specialist possesses all the needed knowledge and skills to succeed. This will be accomplished over time. The credential of the person and the specific body of knowledge of their given profession will of course support that growth and development, and a basic, strong foundation of clinical knowledge is mandatory. But ACDIS believes that the individual's interpersonal skills related to communication and the written word, the ability to process information and apply critical thinking, and commit to lifelong learning in a self-directed manner, are greater guarantees of their success in the CDI role.

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What is an ACDIS Position Paper?

An ACDIS Position Paper sets a recommended standard for the CDI industry to follow. It advocates on behalf of a certain position or offers concrete solutions for a particular problem. All current members of the ACDIS Advisory Board must review/approve a Position Paper and are encouraged to materially contribute to its creation.