Dear HIM-Interchange readers

I’m sure this issue of HIM-I will resonate with very many of you. Increasingly, a HIM’s work is engaging with data collections on some level and the theme of this Issue, Public Health, Epidemiology and Specialist Data Collections, has provided the opportunity for many people to have their say about the work they do, the things they are passionate about, and to provide tips on how to do things better.

Merilyn Riley and Sonia Palma, as joint guest editors, introduce the topic, with Merilyn engaging us in the subject with a high level discussion of data quality; in particular, she makes the distinction between quality data and data quality, and she challenges us to think about what is needed in an organisation to produce data that are fit for purpose. Sonia discusses the principles of data quality in more detail, using her experience working with a specialist data collection to provide examples of how these principles are put into practice.

With the management of data collections now a mainstream option for HIMs, it is critical that health information management training programs provide opportunities for students to get experience while still in the safe environment that a student placement provides. Five recent graduates have provided a professional placement profile in this Issue, demonstrating the importance of these placements and illustrating perfectly the diversity of employment opportunities for HIMs as well as the extent to which each aspect of the ‘data journey’ contributes to health information that is fit for purpose. Employers now expect that HIMs will be familiar with database structures, data standards and data analysis, as well as having the competencies to undertake routine data quality activities. These student placements have prepared these new HIMs well for their future careers.

While we are mostly well aware of the key uses of the hospital data collections, such as for Commonwealth reporting, health service planning and funding models, it is also important to remember that these collections have a significant local application with a critical impact on the development and maintenance of important public health programs.

I found Monique Kilkenny’s professional profile in this Issue a fascinating read and her advice that combining a health information management degree with further study, in her case, epidemiology and biostatistics, can lead to a very satisfying
career full of exciting opportunities resonates with me. It also emphasises the value of the broad base of skills that a health information management graduate brings to the workplace. No matter where on the data continuum your interest lies, a health information management degree would serve you very well as a stepping-off point for further education.

I hope I have whetted your appetite to read more of this Issue, if not all of it. It provides ample opportunity to reflect on our roles as HIMs in many different organisations. In considering this theme and its relationship with HIM work I reflected on the various ways in which HIMs are engaged with data and how that has changed over the years. From a ‘traditional’ HIM role engaged in form design, storage, filing and retrieval processes around medical record management, we are now professionals actively engaged in the implementation of sophisticated and complex systems that underpin patient management and concurrently produce health data that are now an essential part of our health system, not just a ‘nice-to-have’ component. HIMs now have the opportunity to work at every level in the management of our complex health system: from developing national standards for a range of activities to implementing those standards on the ground; from being responsible for the collection of health data to managing the storage and reporting of those data; from developing training programs in all of these aspects to mentoring new graduates to take their place in this system; and from implementing data quality activities to using those data to evaluate public health initiatives, help develop new public health initiatives and inform health policy development. This is a huge arena and one that is ‘ripe for the picking’. It is up to HIMs and HIM training programs to not get stuck in a default position (thank you, Cathy) but proactively engage with these enormous opportunities. Increasingly I see HIMs doing this, but it is a competitive world and with ‘big data’ the current hot topic, there are people from many professional groups lining up to engage with every aspect of data collection; HIMs will need to compete for their spots!

Please enjoy this Issue – and if you have a comment to make, I would love to hear from you!

References
Riley, M. (2014). Quality data in public health, epidemiology and specialised data collections: what comes out is only as good as what goes in. HIM-Interchange 4(3): xx-xx

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See Cathy Balding’s Quality Conversation No. 6 in this Issue.

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