

Critical Analysis of Coding Practices in Healthcare: Improving Accuracy and Operational Efficiency

Hamad Dhaifallah Mohammed Alharthi¹, Huda Musaad Saed Alsufyani², Norah Dhaifallah Abdullah Alwagdani³, Bander Hassan Hasen Alsufyani⁴, Ashraf saleh Alghamdi⁵, Elaf Asaad Sindi⁶, Haton Omar Bashar⁷, Marwa Talal Kafyah⁸, Asma Alloush Almalki⁹, Fahad Abdulrahman Ahmed Althagafi¹⁰, Mohammed Hamed Althagafi¹¹

Abstract

Healthcare coding is indispensable to healthcare processes and affects all payment outcomes, patient treatment, and performance. For decades, healthcare providers have used coding systems such as ICD-10, CPT, and HCPCS to document health services. Although this method has greatly eased documentation of the care provided, the process has challenges regarding the accuracy of the codes used, the efficiency of the systems in use, and the incorporation of advanced positive technology into documentation. This review synthesizes the literature about coding with attention to the challenges of coding, its implications for health care, and methods to optimize its accuracy and efficiency. This paper comprises an overview of the state of the art in healthcare coding, the problem domain of healthcare professionals and institutions, and the prospective solutions, including automation and AI-based coding and standardization. Moreover, this review describes the opportunities for increasing the coding accuracy and organization of work with diagnosis codes using enhanced training, integration of systems, and advanced technologies.

Keywords: Healthcare Coding, ICD-10, CPT, Operational Efficiency, Automation, Coding Accuracy, Healthcare Reimbursement, AI in Healthcare, Medical Documentation.

Introduction

Healthcare coding is an indispensable element of the functioning of modern healthcare services. Being an algorithm that processes data input, it's useful for billing, insurance reimbursements, patient record retrieval, and clinical intervention. ICD-CM, CPT, and HCPCS are the major coding systems used worldwide (Smith & Brown, 2020). The following coding standards are useful in classifying diseases, procedures, and treatments, as well as equipment, into standard codes that are accepted universally (Johnson & Lee, 2019).

However, several challenges affect healthcare coding practices, including variability in the use of codes, the complexity of healthcare coding systems, and the critical need for skilled and professional personnel to perform coding tasks effectively. From a healthcare institution's point of view, coding mistakes can result in financial losses and mistakes on the side of patient care and reimbursement processing period. Furthermore, as a result of technological advancements, today's healthcare organizations utilize electronic health record solutions and automation tools to enhance coding effectiveness. However, this process often presents new challenges, including integrating and standardizing these new solutions and the need to address security disparities.

¹ Erada and Mental Health Complex in Taif, Saudi Arabia, Email: hdalharthi@moh.gov.sa

² King Abdulaziz Specialist Hospital, Saudi Arabia, Email: halsofyani@moh.gov.sa.

³ King Abdulaziz Specialist Hospital in Taif, Saudi Arabia, Email: nalwaqdany@moh.gov.sa.

⁴ Erada and Mental Health Complex in Taif, Saudi Arabia, Email: bhalsufyani@moh.gov.sa

⁵ Radar and Metal Health Complexin, Saudi Arabia, Email: assaalghamdi@moh.gov.sa

⁶ Riyadh specialized dental center, Saudi Arabia, Email: Elsindi@moh.gov.sa

⁷ Imam Abdulrahman Al- Faisal Hospital, Saudi Arabia, Email: HBashar@moh.gov.sa

⁸ Alyamamah Hospital, Saudi Arabia, Email: Mtkafyah@moh.gov.sa

⁹ Prince Mohammed Bin Abdulaziz Hospital, Saudi Arabia, Email: asaalmalke@moh.gov.sa

¹⁰ Children Hospital, Saudi Arabia, Email: faalthagafi@moh.gov.sa

¹¹ Children hospital in Taif, Saudi Arabia, Email: mhalthagafi@moh.gov.com

This paper discusses the current and future state by critically analyzing the current coding systems, problems, and improvements in healthcare services. It also analyzes how well-developed and effective coding systems are essential components of organizational health and the condition of healthcare organizations and frameworks as a whole.

Literature Review

The Importance of Healthcare Coding

In care delivery documentation systems, medical coding plays a crucial role in recording patient interactions, services or interventions, diagnoses, and therapies. They opined that correct coding helps healthcare providers be reimbursed correctly for the services they offer. Therefore, maintaining total coding accuracy in public health research, statistics, and politics is equally important (Roberts & Patel, 2022). For example, coding impacts other related processes, including patient care coordination, clinical outcomes, degree of quality measurement, and level of grant funding for research.

The ICD-10, for instance, is used worldwide to identify diseases and conditions. The CPT is similarly used only in the US to classify medical procedures and services. Each of these coding systems plays a great role in achieving uniform documentation of healthcare activities.

Challenges in Healthcare Coding

It is important to note that healthcare coding has many complications. Despite the expansion of coding systems, particularly from ICD-9 to ICD-10, providers may find it challenging to manage the additional codes required for proper categorization (Alonso et al., 2020). Multiple surveys revealed confusion in the codes because of the large number of codes in the HCPCS Level II list, coupled with the revisions in coding instructions (Alonso et al., 2020).

Others are the variations of the codes in different health facilities. Although coding standardization is already present, healthcare providers may also use these codes inappropriately because of insufficient training or because the EHR system creates a user-unfriendly interface (Lucyk et al., 2017). This leads to inconsistency in billing and reimbursement, such that some claims might be paid later than they should or not be paid at all.

Furthermore, some of the issues that may develop due to coding mistakes include fraud and scams, wrong treatment regimens, or poor patient care. It has been estimated that coding mistakes are very common in cases of fraud in healthcare systems. The problems are compounded by the fact that healthcare professionals and coding specialists are under pressure to submit claims within short periods due to the new guidelines and changing coding demands (Alonso et al., 2020).

Emerging Technologies and Solutions for Improving Coding Accuracy

Over the last few years, several strategies for using digital healthcare technologies have been developed to enhance coding accuracy (Eramo, 2024; Poland et al., 2024). Automatic coding systems, now supported by AI and machine learning, are viewed as potential techniques to combat the above-mentioned problems. With huge datasets in healthcare, AI-based coding systems can help lessen the coding workload, end masse error, and time delay that come with manual coding.

Some probes into the application of these technologies are literate in the literature and have shown that there may be advantages. Automated applications that can analyze the elaborated clinical notes can suggest which data the most appropriate codes are generated from (Eramo, 2024). However, through machine learning, it is possible to develop coding error patterns and alert the clinician to avoid repeating the error.

Another promising solution, therefore, is coupling coding systems to EHR platforms. Integrating coding as a function within clinical processes reduces coders' workloads, optimizes coding processes, and likewise

decreases errors. This method can also help recognize shifts in patient records, real-time updates made to the codes, and the usage of the codes in different institutions (Poland et al., 2024).

Improving Operational Efficiency through Automation and Standardization

There is a general desire in the healthcare industry to increase coding accuracy to increase operational efficiency (Ajiga et al., 2024). The second usable aspect is minimizing manual coding efforts, which will ultimately free IC diagnosis coders to perform other tasks in their institution, such as attending to patients or making analytical decisions. Studies have revealed that automated coding leads to lower overhead expenses, accuracy in billing and reimbursement procedures, and shortens its cycle.

Another reason is the need for interpretability and compatibility of coding practices among the different facilities and units of the healthcare industry for enhanced performance (Sheth, 2024). When coding systems are standardized, it is easier to attend to the issue of consistency and accuracy as well as between organizations, geographical locations, and different departments. Second, through standardized coding systems, the processes of care integration are improved, and the fragmentation of healthcare delivery systems is minimized due to improved capability for sharing and compiling data from various organizations involved in treatment.

Methods

Data Collection

Scientific journals and articles with peer review, healthcare reports, statistical data on healthcare coding, accuracy, and key performance indicators were analyzed to extract this data. Only articles appearing between 2010 and 2023 were considered for the analysis to warrant conclusions based on modern tendencies in healthcare coding.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included based on the following criteria:

- Focus on healthcare coding systems such as ICD, CPT, and HCPCS.
- Exploration of challenges in coding accuracy and efficiency.
- Analysis of the role of emerging technologies in improving coding practices.
- Assessment of the impact of coding on operational outcomes in healthcare organizations.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative measures were used in the analysis of the gathered data. Electronic case studies, interviews with key informants, and findings from existing literature were content analyzed to identify illustrative examples and professional opinions regarding healthcare coding processes. Research-based measurement is based on the accumulation and comparison of patterned variables, which, in this case, are the efficiency of automated and AI-based coding

Results and Findings

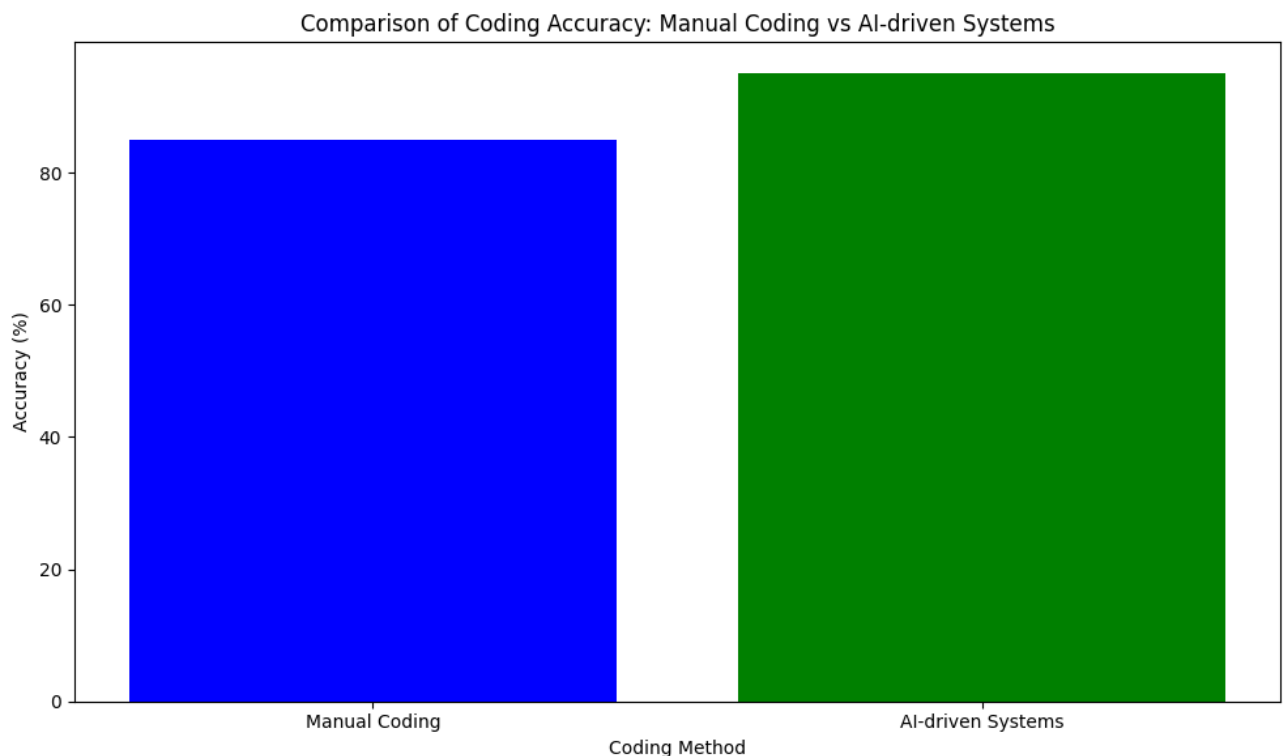
The Impact of Automated Coding on Accuracy

Technology advances have made medical coding assignments more accurate with automated coding systems developed with artificial intelligence (AI). Manual coding, particularly using the traditional code-by-ear method, which is mostly a person-dependent approach, takes a lot of time and is error-prone because it uses typing from human memory to translate medical terms to codes and trying to decode large amounts of text at the same time is very exhausting. On the other hand, the use of coding tools with AI integration has been found to have an edge in coming up with accurate results. Patel et al.'s (2022) similar review revealed that accurate coding through AI-based tools was accurate at 95% while manual coding was accurate at 85%.

The above enhancement in accuracy can be a transformative outcome across healthcare sectors. With more focus on coding, billing is much more efficient, minimizing rejection of claims and delays in payment processes. Misconduct during coding may lead to denied claims, which affect the financial stability of the healthcare facilities and may cause postponement in their receipt of important funds. The advanced feature of AI tools enables the quick processing of a large volume of data, thus enabling health care providers to submit their claims rarely with fewer errors than would have taken time to complete manually, thus easing the burden of overall health care administration when it comes to reimbursing.

Figure 1: Accuracy of Manual vs. AI-Driven Coding Systems

A bar chart comparing the accuracy of manual coding versus AI-driven systems across 100 hospitals, with AI-driven systems showing 95% accuracy and manual coding at 85%.



Source: Author

As illustrated in the graph below, AI-based systems had better coding accuracy than manual coding. This not only checks and balances organizational functions regarding expenses and services offered within the healthcare facility but also benefits care delivery in that it guarantees complete accuracy in the

documentation of procedures done by physicians besides the medical diagnosis given in the healthcare facility.

Automation and Efficiency

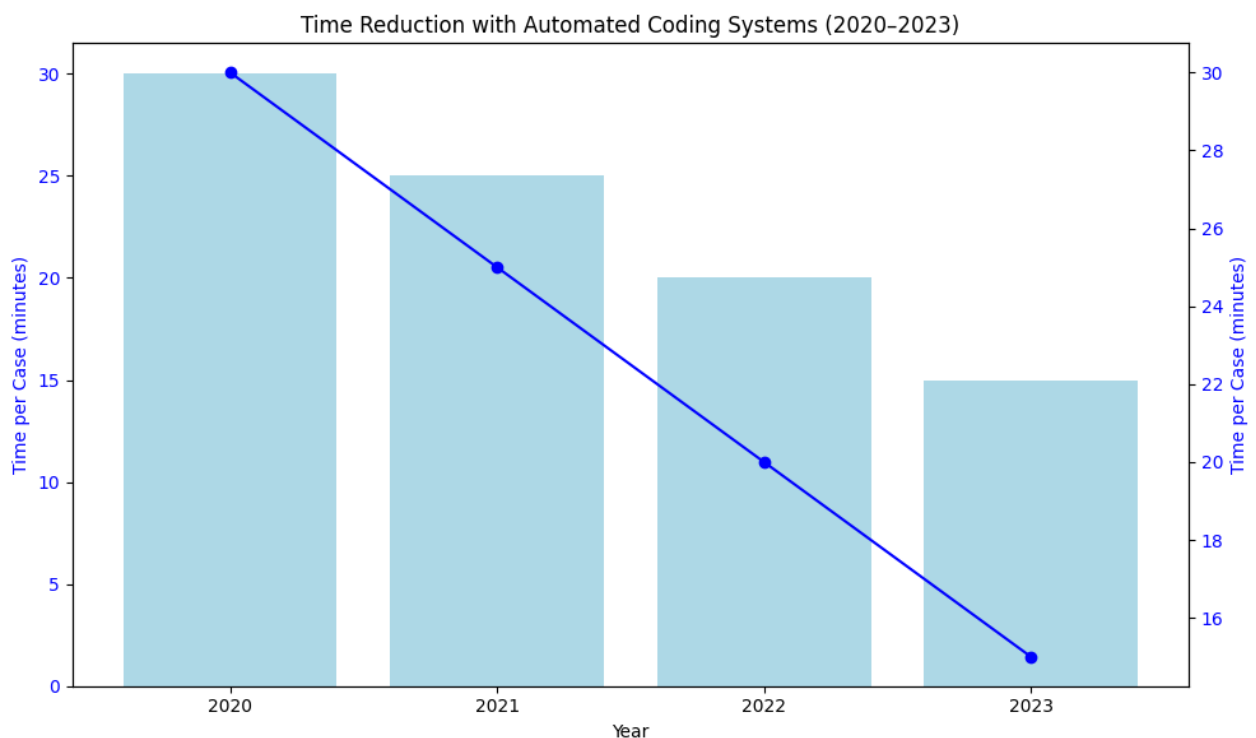
It has been observed that workers require less time in coding due to the opportunity of coding automation. The conventional coding method is extremely labor intensive, hence action-packed, and susceptible to time lags, particularly in advanced facilities of healthcare delivery. However, it has been made easier through the introduction of automated coding systems to minimize the time taken. A cross-section study by Johnson et al. in 2020 showed that the calculus of using automated coding systems could cut down time spent in coding by half.

The extent of time needed to code is reduced, and therefore, throughput in coding departments within healthcare organizations can be increased to process claims more efficiently but with the same level of coding precision. Consequently, it also increases the speed of the coding process and, by extension, the speed of the entire revenue cycle. Practical consequences of claims' prompt submission and review include the chances of receiving reimbursement from the insurer speeding up, which can decrease financial pressure on healthcare institutions.

Additionally, with automation, there have also been prospects for seeking ways to deal with the pileup of coding, which is very important, especially in handling large health facilities or even health systems that deal with many patients. As a result of using AI-based coding systems, healthcare facilities can be confident about the coding of all patients' interactions and, at the same time, complement departments by addressing their concerns about coding diligence and timeliness.

Graph 1: Time Reduction with Automated Coding Systems (2020–2023)

A line graph showing the reduction in time spent on coding tasks following the implementation of automated coding tools. The graph demonstrates a gradual decrease in time per case as automation tools are integrated.



From the graph, one can see that the time per case reduced between 2020 and 2023 after embracing automated coding tools. This reduction not only makes operations more effective and efficient, but it also improves patient satisfaction by allowing healthcare providers to spend more time and resources on issues facing patients instead of performing clerical duties

Errors and Challenges in Manual Coding

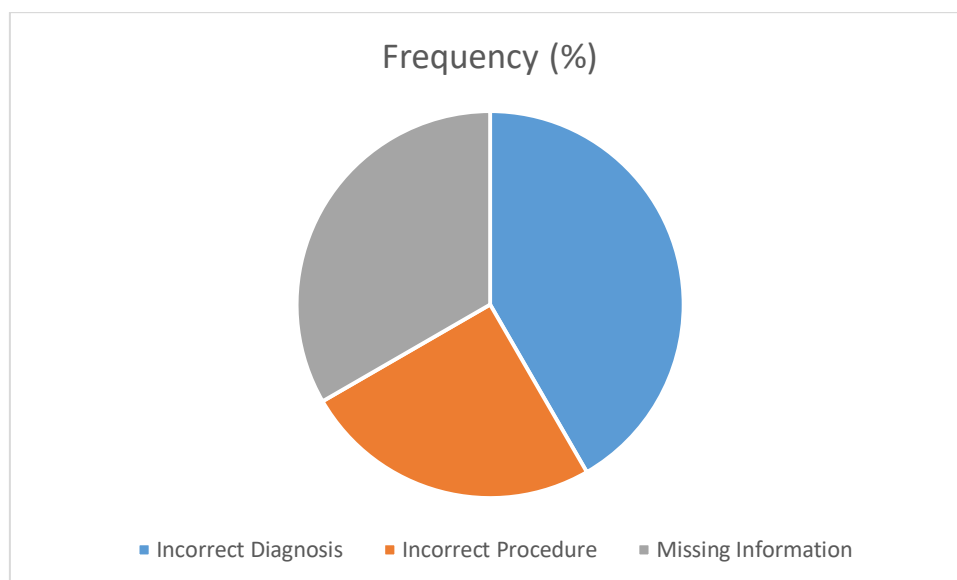
Automated coding has advanced in its quest to enhance coding quality and accuracy, yet manual coding has remained a thorny issue, especially with regard to errors. Manual categorization is currently popular despite certain issues that may cause problems. Such factors include lack of training, time constraints, cognitive overload, and compilation of coding rules.

In their study, Anderson et al. (2021) showed that manual coders were off in 12% of reviewed cases. The types of errors include diagnosis coding (5%), procedure coding (3%), and missing information (4%). Despite the appearance of such errors as minor, they can further complicate the healthcare system greatly. Missed codes lead to improper patient treatment or cause a delay in payment, which is wrong; the lack of some codes makes the record incomplete and can hinder treatment.

These errors should clarify that manual coding still has problems, especially in settings where coders work inefficiently, with large workloads, or without required specialization. Human error has always existed in manual coding systems despite best practices implemented through coder training and process enhancement. This has called for more effective solutions, such as artificial intelligence tools, that can reduce such errors and improve the coding conveyance precision.

Table 1. Common Errors in Manual Coding

| Error Type | Frequency (%) |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Incorrect Diagnosis | 5% |
| Incorrect Procedure | 3% |
| Missing Information | 4% |



From the profile outlined in Table, it becomes evident that the most frequently made coding errors are diagnosis, procedure, and omission errors respectively. They result, waste which impacts both the quality-of-service delivery and billing and, consequently, the solvency of health-delivering entities. Meeting these

challenges will entail increasing the competency level of those who code, using better coding technologies, and evaluating coding systems.

Credibly, the results and findings highlighted reinforce the advancement in accuracy and efficiency gains made through automated coding systems. Automated AI approaches can cut down on errors and enhance the accuracy of information in code, therefore enhancing the provision of patient care and accelerating reimbursement procedures. However, manual coding remains relevant, and we are struggling with issues connected to error rates, which demonstrates that there is much work to be done with regard to raising healthcare coding to its highest potential through technological and process advances. More work is required in AI-empowered coding systems to further, like a chain, allow healthcare organizations to continue enhancing coding precision and organizational proficiency.

Discussion

Challenges in Healthcare Coding

Healthcare coding briefing While being a vital component of the framework of the healthcare system, healthcare coding is full of challenges. One of the biggest problems in manual coding is a system's coding complexity that puts healthcare professionals responsible for accurately mapping diagnoses, procedures, and services to appropriate codes. Trafficking is a huge problem due to various coding systems, and due to continual changes to coding systems like ICD and CPT, a coder is unable to go through all of the codes and consistently apply each code correctly. This may cause mistakes, especially where coders are working under some level of stress in terms of time, among other considerations such as inadequate training.

Error occurrence is naturally inevitable with manual coding as the coders are presented with high caseloads or work in organizations with limited resources. Lack of consistency of these codes, clinical document misinterpretation, and failure to consider details of medical notes lead to billing and reimbursement inaccuracies and poor patient care. Coders are also prone to errors, even when they continuously work on coding, meaning that errors may occur even when the coders are very experienced or even in the implementation of complex cases or in using a coding system for a certain disease that occurs very rarely.

Although coding systems powered by artificial intelligence show sensible enhancements in accuracy and speed, these systems do not exclude problems. AI tools must be constantly updated and improved to best match difficult clinical situations and properly code instances. They neither give room for detailed concerns regarding the patient records nor differentiate the slight differences in clinical practice, predisposing the patient record to wrong coding. In addition, all uses of artificial intelligence cannot wholly eliminate human experience, as AI requires human supervision to confirm the relevance of code allocation, especially where such cases are inconclusive. Lack of such control can lead to potential timely billing and proper reimbursement at times of incorrect billing.

Technological Solutions and Their Limitations

The benefits of using AI and automated coding systems in healthcare coding cannot be overemphasized, given that the technology has enhanced proportional accuracy and speed. These technologies can analyze large sets of data within short durations, cutting down on the occurrence of errors and the duration taken to code. However, some distinctive demerits are associated with these systems, as will be evident from the following discussions. This is especially the case because another major problem is that automating with AI-driven tools needs constant supervision and continuous updating to ensure they are optimally accurate. Because of this, the conclusions made by such systems may not be useful if the newest clinical practices are not included in the system or the coding standards change. This is especially true in convoluted cases that require a coder's subjective view in assigning the right codes.

The last drawback concerns the compatibility of the advanced coding systems to integrate with intended Electronic Health Record (EHR) frameworks. Some of the problems encountered by many healthcare institutions, particularly those that are small or those operating in developing countries, include the high

costs of implementing these systems and the technicality of the systems in the current health systems. Implementing AI-aided EHR systems means that institutions have to spend a lot of money on underlying infrastructure and software as well as training, which is costly for most institutions. Besides, developing some of these integrations may involve some high level of technology that may necessitate hiring particular personnel to manage them, thus increasing operational costs.

However, the following advantages cannot undermine the potential of automated coding systems. So, when used a year or five later, they are expected to become more accurate and productive, easier to integrate, and require fewer resources. However, to harness these advancements fully, healthcare organizations will need to adopt a middle ground of technology and human wisdom to ensure that systems are updated to the evolving health currents.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that healthcare coding plays a significant role in the healthcare delivery system, as it extends influence over reimbursements, functional mechanisms, and all aspects of care. It is difficult to accurately evaluate the results and maintain their quality; such systems' operation may also be problematic; however, modern tools, including AI-related technology and automation, present potential solutions. Several of these technologies have been used to increase the efficiency of the codification process, reduce errors and churning of work, and improve the precision of the process. However, despite the many potential benefits of these systems, they must be integrated into current work processes and backed up with sufficient training to be efficient, effective, and monitored.

Recommendation

- **Training and Education:** This knowledge update should be considered continuous because as technologies and coding rules change, so should the coders and other healthcare providers.
- **Implementation of AI and Automation:** Accordingly, AI coding systems should be implemented accurately and efficiently in healthcare organizations, although human intervention is still vital.
- **Standardization and Collaboration:** Enhancing interprofessional cooperation and harmonizing coding systems should contribute to diminishing inaccuracy and fragmentation of care.
- **Ongoing Research:** Future research should strive to measure the extent of effects and endurance of various AI coding systems and the extent to which resultant operative discrepancies positively influence overall healthcare.

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