QUALITY ENCOUNTER DATA: NOT SO ELUSIVE

Quality encounter data can seem like an elusive unicorn in the health care world. However, having complete, accurate, and timely data is not only a useful tool but a necessity in building quality health care programs which provide members with needed services, ensure provider costs are being met, and maintain a viable program going forward. Quality data is comprised of all the necessary components from claims or encounters delivered in a consistent format by each of the reporting entities.

Once we have complete, accurate, and timely encounters, what can we do with that data? Below are a few areas in which encounter data can have an impact.

- granular utilization analysis
- cost analysis
- accurate rate setting
- value based purchasing
- utilization management
- quality management
- risk adjusted rates

ELEMENTS FOR QUALITY DATA

Capturing the elusive unicorn requires planning, oversight, and tools. The following items can be used individually; however, applying more of these elements increases the strength of the encounter data.

Health Plan Contracts

Strong, clear, and detailed encounter sections drive the expectations and accountability of the health plan. Consequences for not complying with submitting complete and accurate data should be outlined and adhered to. In addition to the encounter section of the contract, some specific requirements such as requiring a facility that acts as both a nursing facility and adult day health provider to have separate Medicaid provider IDs for each purpose can help to insure that encounters are properly bucketed by service.

National Standards

While national standards *seem* straight forward, it is important to remember that the standards cover all forms of health insurance including commercial, Medicare, and Medicaid. It is important for the state to use the flexibility provided within the national standards to align the data with programmatic needs. For example, while "Paid Amount" is "optional" for 837 formatted files, it is intended to be optional due to sub-contracted, bundled or global payments. Those encounters should also include other indicators to show that these encounters have other payment arrangements.

Encounter System Edits

Efficient and helpful edits can be a useful tool for guiding health plans toward better encounters. Medicaid programs vary by state and using 'off the shelf' edits may not meet the needs of each state. Additionally, using edits designed for fee-for-service claims may not meet the needs or may cause other problems for encounter submissions.

Manuals

States should provide encounter manuals when possible. Encounter manuals provide direction to health plans including data specifications and how to resolve rejections due to encounter edits.

EQR ISCA or Plan Reviews

An in-depth review of the health plan's information systems and processes can be instrumental in identifying gaps, omissions, or errors in the data or organizational processes. These gaps may result in missing or incomplete encounters. States may choose to have reviews more often than required, or choose to have reviews that vary in scope from the basics outlined by CMS. Reviews also offer the opportunity to work with health plans to improve their processes and become more efficient overall.

Technical Assistance

Regular technical assistance provides health plans the opportunity to discuss challenges with encounter submissions as well as develop action plans and resolutions.

Communication

States that provide more communication tend to have better encounter data. This communication can take the form of posted website updates, broadcast emails, and regularly scheduled meetings. For example, if a problem is found in an encounter system edit, notification should be broadcast to the health plans to advise them that an error has been found, the time frame needed to update the edit logic, and what actions the health plan should take. Notification shouldn't be limited to a few plans but to all health plans that submit encounters.

IN CONCLUSION

Clean, accurate and complete data is the cornerstone of good data analytics. Spending time and effort early on to ensure that data is functional and that health plans are supplying comparable data makes future analysis more efficient and insightful. Constant vigilance over the quality of data is necessary to guarantee continued success with reporting and data visualizations. Through the use of outlined strategies and a continual focus on quality, encounter data can inform many inquiries and is the basis for positive research and will bring that unicorn to you. Mercer can help your organization with all the elements listed above.