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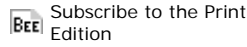
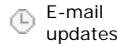
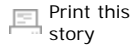
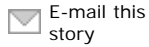
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## Medical billing, coding a booming industry

By CHRISTINA SALERNO  
BEE STAFF WRITER

Last Updated: April 11, 2006, 04:56:52 AM PDT

They don't rush outside to treat bleeding patients in waiting ambulances or take your blood pressure at the doctor's office.

But medical billers and coders play an essential role in the health care industry, their employers say. They work behind the scenes, reviewing each patient's medical chart to determine how much to bill insurance companies.



Angelina Moreno, left, works with payment poster Mary Anaya on Monday morning at Med-America in Modesto. Med-America employs about 400 people in Modesto.

JOAN BARNETT LEE/THE BEE

Stricter health care regulations and an aging population have dramatically increased demand for the profession in recent years.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the field is expected to grow faster than average through 2014.

The trend is reflected in the Northern San Joaquin Valley, where a number of medical billing firms are located.

One of the largest, Med-America Billing Services, employs 425 people at its Modesto offices in the West Campus Business Park. The firm started with just three employees in 1974, reaching 200 by 2000.

The firm is still growing, despite doubling its size in five years, said

THE BEE'S



[Complete Index](#) ▶ Chief Operations Officer James Proffitt. The company hires 10 to 20 employees a month, he said.

The increase in demand is largely because of more rigid billing regulations, said Diane Lemire, a professional billing consultant and coding instructor at Modesto Junior College.

"There have been more regulations since the 1980s, which require more accuracy and playing by the rules," she said.

Audits are regularly performed on hospitals and medical practices to detect any fraud or overbilling, Lemire said.

"Every doctor's office is getting more and more scrutiny," she said. "There has to be accurate billing and accurate coding for every single service, whether it is an X-ray or lab test."

Technology has also significantly changed the medical billing field, said Janet Selover, the owner of Professional Billing and Management Services in Modesto, a firm established in 1987.

"More insurance companies are accepting electronic claims, which allow the doctor to be paid quicker," she said. "The movement is to go paperless or use as little paper as possible."

As a result, the job has become heavily computer-oriented. Those interested in entering the field should expect to spend a significant portion of their day entering data into a computer.

### **Formal training is unnecessary**

Sonia Nevarez, 27, started working as a medical biller at Med-America seven years ago and is now an assistant supervisor.

In a typical day, medical billers process between 60 to 100 charts, she said. About two hours are spent entering data on the computer. The rest of the day is often spent following up on claims over the phone, she said.

The job requires heavy multi-tasking, she said, and there is little downtime.

"It is never boring," she said. "There is always something else to do."

Although it's preferred, formal education or experience is not necessary to become a medical biller. Employers consider the most important qualifications to be strong typing skills and a professional demeanor on the phone.

Many billing firms offer on-the-job training for entry-level employees. Salaries range between \$8 to \$20 an hour, depending on experience.

Medical coders, who often work side by side with billers, are

responsible for assigning a code to each diagnosis and procedure. Coders consult classification manuals and rely on their knowledge of diseases to assign the proper codes.

The demand for coders is even higher than billers because the job requires more skills and classroom training. Classes and certification are available through many community colleges, including Modesto Junior College.

Demand for medical billers and coders is expected to continue to increase as aging baby boomers and their parents require more medical services.

There is also an expected increase in the number of medical providers relocating to the valley, which will further boost the market.

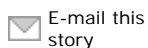
American Medical Response is consolidating its California operations and basing them in Modesto next year. The company plans to add about 150 positions, most of them in medical billing.

Kaiser Permanente is building a \$462 million medical center on Dale Road in Modesto, which is slated to be open by November 2007. The hospital will hire a large staff of medical billers, company officials said.

The result will be an even stronger demand and higher wages for medical billers in the valley, said Selover.

"Good help is hard to find in the medical billing industry," she said. "There is always going to be a need."

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