

# MDS Alert

## MDS Coordinator: Not All Heroes Wear Capes

**Check out which skills serve MDS coordinators well.**

MDS coordinators are responsible for depicting a facility's care for payment, quality, and survey evaluation. Their work is the cornerstone of everything at a SNF, and while that responsibility can be overwhelming the realities of the workload emphasize the importance and value of having an MDS nurse who knows what she's doing.

You know the MDS coordinator role is unique, in that it combines nursing knowledge and skill with the ability to assess and code resident care accurately. Beyond those obvious qualifications for the job, MDS nurses must utilize good leadership — though most facilities' staff structure doesn't have other nurses reporting directly to the coordinator — and often must help educate the rest of their team.

Here are four proficiencies and personality traits shared by superstar MDS nurses.

**1. Detail-oriented without losing sight of the horizon.** The MDS requires an attention to detail that will prevent any mishaps while coding, as well as an understanding and appreciation of the larger picture of how the information coded into the MDS is used. He needs to be able to approach the document (and residents) holistically, seeing and understanding how each aspect plays into and affects the whole.

Plus: He needs to be familiar enough with each resident's care to reflect it in the MDS document, as well as catch any subtle or egregious documentation errors in the clinical record, as well as the MDS, that could otherwise negatively impact surveys or reimbursement. A careful MDS coordinator is a big part of your defense against F-tags or insufficient reimbursement.

**2. RUG skills.** Providing high-quality care requires excellent staff and a lot of time; it is, therefore, expensive. An MDS coordinator with an understanding of the fiscal side of the MDS instrument and process can translate that knowledge into money.

Extra credit: An excellent MDS nurse will be able to look at resident clinical records and see details in a resident's clinical record that would reflect higher, better reimbursement for care that has already been delivered.

**3. Excellence in communicating and team building.** There are too many responsibilities and data collection points on the MDS for one person to feel total ownership over the RAI process. The coordinator depends upon the information collected by team members to do her job, and working with others is really important for making the process as smooth (and accurate) as possible. A coordinator should feel confident about communicating her needs from team members, as well as making any tweaks in their interpersonal communication necessary to get the information needed. She should also work to make her team members, at all levels, feel valued and vital to the process of providing and recording care.

**4. skill in time and people management.** With all of the responsibilities heaped on the MDS coordinator, becoming overwhelmed is a distinct possibility. An excellent MDS nurse will be able to set boundaries on his time and job description; he'll do what he needs to do to complete the MDS for her residents without becoming bogged down with extraneous requests on his time. Don't let the position's responsibilities exceed your capabilities, either in the number of assessments or with too many meetings.

**From management's perspective** if you're hiring someone to fill this role, don't forget the unmatched significance of the MDS coordinator's work on your SNF's bottom line, in terms of actual dollars coming in. The MDS coordinator depicts the care provided by the rest of your staff, and if her work is anything but flawless, your facility's quality measures, its 5-star quality rating, and information presented to the potential residents when choosing a facility could all be

compromised.

If your hands are tied and you cannot offer the level of compensation you know the position deserves, think of other, smaller ways to make sure your MDS coordinator feels valued. Here are some ideas from **Harmony Healthcare International**, as edited by **Kris Mastrangelo**, president and CEO:

- Make sure her office space is private enough to give her the space and focus she needs to do her job.
- Take him out to lunch (and pick up the bill).
- Dedicate a "good" parking spot and reserve it for her exclusive use.
- Formally recognize his work via your facility's star employee recognition program (if you have one).

Invest in her education and training. Even if she's fully qualified and has the knowledge to complete all of her duties as required, management can acknowledge her importance by investing in keeping her knowledge current. (This is good for your facility, too, as this investment could increase her loyalty to your company, as well potentially show dividends in her coding and your reimbursement.)