



## Medical Billing: TWO PATHS WITH A SINGLE GOAL

**M**edical billing specialists don't administer tests, write prescriptions or deliver medical treatment. But without them, every medical practice would grind to a halt.

Each service rendered by a medical establishment comes with a cost. Billing specialists make sure those costs are properly assessed and categorized and that claims are filed and billed to the correct insurance provider. Once an insurance provider has a claim, the billing specialist ensures the claim is paid in full and within the agreed-upon timeframe.

It's a juggling act that requires a billing specialist to keep a lot of balls in the air at once. Hospitals, private physician practices and third-party billing services rely on skilled billing experts to oversee the financial aspect of their operations — a need that will only increase as the medical field continues its rapid growth to meet the demands of an aging population.

Cuyahoga Community College offers two paths to a career as a medical billing specialist: an associate degree and a certificate. Each path provides different opportunities, but both have the singular goal of providing essential billing support to medical practices.

### ASSOCIATE DEGREE

Tri-C students in the medical billing degree program study for an Associate of Applied Science in Health Information Management Technology (HIMT).

The degree takes more time to complete than the certificate, but offers a broader knowledge base from which graduates can begin their careers.

"Students can attend full time or part time, with classes available days, evenings and Saturdays," said Kathy Loflin, HIMT program manager at the Metropolitan Campus. "If you take night classes part time, you can finish in three years. Full-time day students can finish in 22 months."

Tri-C's HIMT program covers subject matter including HIPAA regulations, medical coding, medical terminology and basic biology.

After graduation, medical billing specialists with an HIMT degree can work in a wide range of medical settings, including hospitals — where detailed knowledge of medical coding standards such as ICD-10 is required.

"Our degree program dives deeper into the coding side," Loflin said. "It allows graduates to pursue employment where that deeper knowledge is needed, as in facilities where surgery is performed."

An HIMT degree also opens doors for graduates to take on project management work.

"With enough project management hours under your belt, you can become certified as a project manager," Loflin said. "That can be very useful in a hospital setting, where teams need to be assembled and coordinated, and timelines need to be met."

### CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

Though Loflin recommends the degree program to anyone who is able to make the time and study commitment, it doesn't take two or three years to become a medical billing specialist. For those interested in a fast-track path to a medical billing career, Tri-C also offers a short-term certificate program that can be completed in two semesters.

The medical billing certificate is for those who need a high degree of schedule flexibility or who want to expedite the start of a new career.

"The certificate program can be completed entirely online," Loflin said. "Since it's shorter in duration, it's obviously not going to be as intensive as the degree program; but it will still adequately prepare you to enter the field."

The program does not require completion of a biology course, which means certificate students will lack some of the basic firsthand knowledge



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of anatomy and physiology that degree students receive. However, certificate students do complete two semesters of medical terminology coursework.

Ultimately, this means certificate program graduates are not as qualified to work in hospital and surgical settings, where anatomical knowledge is useful for coders and billers. Instead, these graduates often find employment in private practices and third-party billing companies.

### THE FUTURE

Whether a student opts for a degree or a certificate, employment prospects for medical billing specialists are good and projected to improve in the coming years. The expansion of the medical field, combined with attrition due to retirement, will continue to create a need for new billing specialists to enter the field.

"There is fierce competition out there for good billing specialists," Loflin said. "I always tell my students that if you're good and you're willing to change jobs, you can move up in this field and make a good living. With a degree, you can probably start out making \$18 an hour; but if you're good, you could easily be making \$25 an hour or more within five or 10 years. The need is definitely there."