

Enhancing the Nebraska Cancer Registry's Death Clearance Workflow

AUTHORS: Qianru Wu, Marissa Ayotte, Nivia Vazquez-Cubano, Powell Justis, Elaine Flores, Mary Mesnard, Wilhelmina Ross, Mark Watson

SUMMARY

To improve the Nebraska Cancer Registry's (NCR's) annual death clearance activities, email-based follow-ups with physicians were implemented, supplemented by assistance from local health department (LHD) directors.

CHALLENGE

The NCR faced several recurring issues in its traditional follow-back process:

1. Low response rates: Physicians' response rates to mailed follow-back letters were consistently poor.
2. Delays and miscommunication: Letters often took weeks or months to reach the correct recipient within a facility. Many were lost or ignored during internal forwarding.
3. Limited success of repeated mailings: Sending additional rounds of follow-back letters yielded only marginal improvements in response rates.

SOLUTION

The NCR transitioned from mailed follow-back letters to email notifications. The new process involved three rounds of emails sent directly to physicians' email addresses. To streamline this, a Visual Basic (VB) program was developed to automate email generation. Each email included a personalized PDF attachment combining data from two sources:

1. A spreadsheet containing the physicians' contact information.
2. A pre-designed Microsoft® Word template with a cover letter and a form requesting details about the deceased.

For physicians associated with multiple cases, separate emails were generated for each deceased individual. After three rounds of email notifications, the NCR identified non-responsive physicians and sought assistance from LHD directors to reach them.

RESULTS

The new workflow delivered significant improvements:

- The automated process reduced the time required for each email round to less than an hour (excluding initial program development).
- After three rounds of email follow-ups, 31% of physicians responded.
- Assistance from LHD directors increased the overall response rate to 45%, compared to the previous average of 32% achieved through mailed follow-backs.

This marked improvement highlights the effectiveness of the email-based approach in enhancing communication with and response rates from physicians.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The NCR's revamped workflow for physician follow-backs boosted the efficiency and effectiveness of its death clearance activities. Switching to email follow-ups offered several advantages, including:

- Higher response rates: A noticeable increase in physician engagement, which also helped us update or verify contact information of physicians in the NCR's database.
- Cost savings: Reduced expenses compared to traditional mailings.
- Faster turnaround: Emails reached recipients more quickly and reliably.
- Streamlined processes: Automated email generation reduced administrative workload and ensured accurate documentation.
- Promoting collaboration: Involving LHD directors fostered stronger communication among state registries, physicians, and local health departments, ensuring a collaborative approach to future death clearance activities.

While challenges remained, such as verifying accurate email addresses with the Licensure Unit and preventing emails from being overlooked, the overall success of this approach demonstrated its value. The NCR's innovations in follow-back workflows set a strong precedent for enhancing similar activities in public health registries.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention