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New HFMA Chair Calls on Health Care Professionals to Thrive in the Face of Great Change

SPECIAL SECTION: CHAIR PROFILE

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AS MARY MIRABELLI, HFMA, ASSUMES THE ROLE OF HFMA CHAIR THIS MONTH, DURING HFMA'S NATIONAL INSTITUTE IN LAS VEGAS ON JUNE 26-29, HER MESSAGE IS ONE OF PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PERSEVERANCE DURING PERIODS OF MONUMENTAL CHANGE. HER THEME: THRIVE.



For Mirabelli, vice president of the global healthcare practice for Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE), this theme sends an important message to healthcare leaders seeking to find their footing in the face of the financial and societal shifts in the nation's healthcare system. The changes require the industry to continuously innovate to bring together a fragmented delivery framework that is rapidly shifting from volume- to value-based care and payment models that will support a far more consumer-focused healthcare delivery system. The aim is to empower consumers, medical providers, and healthcare leaders with state-of-the-art technology, thereby promoting improved outcomes and reduced costs.

Mirabelli's message is that healthcare professionals must do much more than simply respond to this change; they must find a way to thrive in the face of it. For Mirabelli, this message is part inspiration, part determination, and part fortitude. Economics are aligning to reshape health care, and so are patients, she says.

Mirabelli speaks of this personal connection with patients with conviction and passion, recalling her early work and training as an occupational therapist. As a healthcare leader, Mirabelli understands the economics of patient care, and she can empathize from experience about the heart of care, especially as it relates to treatment and rehabilitation of patients following a life-changing diagnosis.

The current state of healthcare billing and finance is complicated, and remains one of the industry's core improvements in an attempt to redefine the financial experience for patients to help them better understand billing, charges, reimbursement, deductibles, and copays. Mirabelli yearns for the day when patients can say, "The whole billing process was simple, easy to understand, and streamlined."

Mirabelli also recognizes that there is greatness in the U.S. healthcare system. "The incredible part of it is how much compassion exists in our system, and how much it really does take a village," Mirabelli says. "I realize that my obligation is to pay it forward. It's my job to make it easier, better, more understandable for the next person."

That's why, as she assumes the role of HFMA Chair, Mirabelli wants to impart her message to HFMA members, that they should find a way to thrive in the face of the great disruption and innovation affecting the business of health care. That message signals an opportunity to redesign the healthcare system for the better.

A Career Built From Diverse Experiences

Mirabelli's career and life have been anything but traditional. Although her love of math put her on a path toward engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, her passion to help others quickly led her to a completely different academic discipline: occupational therapy. "Ultimately, it was caring for my dad in his final days that determined my decision to go into occupational therapy, and so I did that," she recalls.

After graduating and gathering a few years of experience, Mirabelli quickly moved into management positions, but some of her most profound career accomplishments grew out of her personal connection with patients.

"I did home health care as an extra job, because I wanted to make sure I kept my skills up to speed," Mirabelli says. "I will always remember one of my patients who almost cried with joy that he could move his arms in a way that he couldn't after his stroke. And I felt my efforts enabled him to do that, based upon the exercises and the encouragement. I will never forget the day I went to his house and witnessed his joy when he showed me that he could actually open and read a newspaper." He made the choice to thrive.

In the late 1980s, Mirabelli added a master's degree in management from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management to her academic credentials, concentrating on finance and marketing. Her career took shape as she advanced through several positions, including senior manager at Capgemini and senior manager at EY (then Ernst & Young).

"I went from being in charge of a department to being in charge of a bigger department to being a hospital administrator of many departments to hospital operations consulting, and that's all about the value proposition and really understanding the numbers," she says.

At EY, Mirabelli began to work with Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), and during her tenure with EY, the firm introduced the concept of a shared service center for revenue cycle, human resources, supply chain, and general accounting accounts payable/accounts receivable. "I was asked at that point to take on the revenue cycle component of this giant company's business case as their consultant. I learned a lot about the revenue cycle, shared services, change management, consolidation, and overall finance in health care." Her clinical and financial background helped.

"As a therapist, you observe, you evaluate, you diagnose, you treat, and then you look for outcomes," she says. "Understanding that process is what every business problem is about. So in that respect, being an occupational therapist was a really important part of my career and my life."

Mirabelli was then offered the opportunity to join HCA as vice president of implementation for the revenue cycle. She joined and then expanded her skill set by implementing a revenue cycle consolidation plan. “I always tease that this was a consultant’s worst nightmare—I had to actually help implement what we recommended,” she says.

A large-scale business case at HCA offered Mirabelli valuable experience that—coupled with her clinical background and large-scale implementation skills—allowed her to move to the clinical side of the business, being named the chief project officer in HCA’s Clinical Services Group. There, Mirabelli secured financing for multiple enterprise initiatives and took on responsibility for implementing them on time and on budget. Those initiatives included the electronic health record across all 165 HCA hospitals, meaningful use compliance programs, and a clinical data warehouse. Over the course of her career, Mirabelli has opened occupational service centers, grown departments from six people to more than 200, and most recently, in her leadership role with HPE, helped to shape how technology can build a stronger healthcare system, from individual patient care to population health.

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Goals for HFMA

Mirabelli’s goals for HFMA will focus on helping the Association stay relevant and find new ways to bring value and grow the membership base. Mirabelli believes HFMA should continue to demonstrate thought leadership as it relates to finance and business challenges. “I’m very proud of what we’ve done from a thought-leadership perspective,” she says.

“I think as the Association’s leader, [HFMA president and CEO] Joe Fifer has lived up to his own theme, which was *courage in leadership*,” Mirabelli says. “He wants HFMA to try new things, and to *do* new things. I hope at the end of my year, we will have grown membership in new markets that we haven’t ventured into before.”

Those markets include hospital finance professionals, physician leaders and physician practice managers, and health plan executives. Reaching all of these stakeholders necessitates understanding the needs of people with diverse professional responsibilities.

“My hope is that we get more sophisticated about how we look at the needs of the membership base and develop more value for those members,” Mirabelli says. “I don’t want our members to be afraid of the future. I want our members to think about what’s the right thing to do. What’s really best for our country, and best for our citizens?”

Losing fee-for-service revenue and the impact of a changing business model are scary propositions, Mirabelli says, but she wants to instill hope about health care’s future: “I want them to embrace innovation so we all can improve health care.”

The Challenges

When Mirabelli first joined HFMA, she served on the association’s Patient-Friendly Billing Task Force. “The mission was to get something in a patient’s hands that enabled the patient to understand what was going on with the account, financially,” she says. “So that, in and of itself, was admirable.”

This trend in consumerism also is driving demand for greater healthcare price transparency and an improved patient experience. Changing expectations are affecting the role of finance professionals as facilitators and educators about bills and costs related to care.



“I think we have made progress,” Mirabelli says. “Speaking for myself personally, I can tell you that all of the bills I have received lately have been very clear about what I owe and what I don’t owe, and the EOBs are matching the bills I get. But I still don’t think it’s easy enough for patients.”

Mirabelli draws on her experiences in her role as vice president of global healthcare practice at HPE. She recognizes that the business of health care is administered far differently in other countries, yet faces many of the same challenges.

“The issues that people are trying to solve in health care are global. The world is dealing with aging populations and chronic diseases now emerging in developing countries, thanks to the Western lifestyle in some. So keeping people at home, letting them age with grace, managing chronic disease, and getting to more personalized medicine all are things that developed countries around the world are facing. Now we’re starting to see what’s happening in emerging countries in terms of how they will handle health care.

“What is interesting is that the human element is the same, and what we hope for is the same,” she says. “We all hope for good health. That is universal. There’s so much more that binds us together than keeps us apart.

“If you go to any of the Nordic countries, you’ll see that they are passionate about doing the best they can for their citizens, and they feel accountable to their citizenship to provide incredible health care and to keep them healthy,” she observes. “It feels very different than in America, where we are much more fragmented.”

Mirabelli recounts how HPE has addressed this challenge: “We recently implemented a system in Spain with a mobile app that gives patients a lot of information, including their electronic health records, their lab results, and their medication lists. They can text their clinicians and ask them questions, they can schedule, and they can access educational resources. It’s built so that it gets to know patients as Google does, and it makes suggestions. Here in the United States, we would struggle to put it together because too many parties ‘own’ the data and the data is not interoperable.”

The United States is working to transform healthcare delivery, Mirabelli says. And HFMA is helping to shape the future of health care through education, thought leadership, and preparing the next generation of finance leaders. The stakes are high, Mirabelli adds, but so is the opportunity to change the world for the better. She encourages all to look at this world and THRIVE!

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Publication Date: Wednesday, June 01, 2016

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