MEET A MEMBER

When you get stuck, phone a friend

Lawrence J. Berthold, RN, BSN, who goes by Larry to most, Larry Joe to some, and Lawrence to few, has worked for PENN Medicine his entire nursing career, even going back to his first clinical rotation. Currently, he oversees the CDI teams across the PENN health system. He participates in both the South Jersey/Philadelphia/Delaware and the Central Pennsylvania ACDIS local chapters.

ACDIS: How long have you been in the CDI field?
Berthold: This year marks my 11th year as a CDI specialist. I’ve worked as a chart-side CDI specialist/entity-based team lead, then the manager of two CDI teams across entities, and now am the corporate director of CDI across PENN.

ACDIS: What did you do before entering CDI?
Berthold: In my nursing career prior to CDI, I worked as a case manager on a geriatric-acute care for elders (ACE) unit, and as a bedside and charge nurse on a medical-surgical unit with an oncology and human immunodeficiency virus specialty, all at PENN.

Prior to PENN, I worked as a shift supervisor and computer operator in a data center and have been paid as a poet, writer, tutor, singer-musician, dog walker, burger flipper, etc.

ACDIS: Why did you get into this line of work?
Berthold: In terms of nursing, it was more in response to life changes. My previous employer was closing local offices, and I had to decide whether to keep my job and relocate (away from family) and/or take the opportunity to reeducate and redirect my career. Nursing seemed to offer a myriad of opportunities in all kinds of directions.

As far as my CDI career, it was introduced as a new discipline/department coming to PENN. As a case manager/utilization review nurse and as a bedside nurse, I often saw the effects of documentation on outcomes and successful care and tried to fix it in various ways when it was broken—as a peer instructor/mentor, via our documentation committee, and in various discussions with clinical colleagues.

Also, a friend, who was a new internist when I was a unit nurse, took on the role of our chief of quality and safety when CDI hit PENN in 2007. At the time, I worked as a case manager. No one knew what to make of CDI, just that documentation was something that had to be fixed. My friend came to me and said, “I want to take this on and figure it out. You complain and teach all the time about documentation. Come along and help me do this.”

That friend is now one of our chief medical officers (Dr. Kevin Fosnocht), and I am the corporate director of CDI. We’re still figuring it out every day. It’s that curiosity and optimism for the best case that drives us. Basically, we were brave enough to jump in when others weren’t and weren’t afraid to ask for help, respect those that offered, and remain open and curious.
ACDIS: What has been your biggest challenge?

Berthold: Taking the “ask” of CDI from the stage of “can you do us this favor” to “can I help you with that so we get it right,” changing the providers’ concept of what codes (and the related documentation) represent from something that’s needed for billing to the building blocks of the clinical portrait that represents each individual patient across the continuum—in quality and care protocols, research, public health initiatives, marketing, etc.

ACDIS: What has been your biggest reward?

Berthold: The positive effects of CDI on patient care, hearing one physician teach another physician about why documentation matters and how easy it is, and being able to offer another level of opportunity to nurses that are already experts at what they do, just like the opportunity I found in CDI.

I love to help fellow RNs take their clinical knowledge and experience, introduce the coding discipline and literally expand their understanding and horizons beyond the bedside capacity, and help them become experts in how health systems work and how care is best represented and delivered.

ACDIS: How has the field changed since you began working in CDI?

Berthold: What often started as a matter of financial survival (MS-DRGs!) has become a unique and well-respected discipline that is driven by quality. CDI shines a light across the continuum of care and works to benefit patients. This comes from the availability of better references, better-pointed care via provisions of a knowledgeable baseline, better communication of such, and better protocols and safety understanding related to care via detailed and true clinical portraits.

ACDIS: Can you mention a few of the “gold nuggets” of information you’ve received from colleagues on The Forum or through ACDIS?

Berthold: Mostly, the camaraderie has been the epiphany repeatedly for me. I started as the sole CDI specialist at one of our entities (technically, I was the “team lead,” which isn’t as easy as it sounds—I can be a handful to manage), but had a second colleague (hello, Florenda!) added in a few months later.

For a few years, it was just the two of us (it would be six years or so until we went corporate), and the few gatherings we could get to quench our collegial thirst (symposiums, web and telephone discussions, and the initial visits within ACDIS) were our biggest bright spots.

To realize there were others with similar challenges and navigating similar pitfalls, and to hear how innovative they were and to find them as open to share what they learned, tied us back to the teamwork we always knew as nurses and kept us challenged and repeatedly renewed.

ACDIS: If you have attended, how many ACDIS conferences have you been to? What are your favorite memories?
**Berthold:** I have been lucky enough to attend seven ACDIS conferences. PENN is very supportive of education, and I/we have always made sure it’s an important part of progression for myself and our team, but also across our system. CDI specialists are, in essence, teachers of documentation. The individual chart might be the task, but the larger-focus culture shift takes time and lots and lots of patience and teaching.

My favorite memories are related mostly to being able to put faces to names—saying thank you to all the people that have mostly anonymously helped me, taught me, and laughed and cried with me over the years and getting to know them as people. These are people like Robert Gold, MD, James Kennedy, MD, Erica Remer, MD, Richard Pinson, MD, Chuck Buck, Brian Murphy, Melissa Varnavas, Cheryl Erickson, Suzanne Rogers, etc.

I love being able to hear all of the stories and experiences each year and to occasionally be able to provide some experiences myself. It’s a warm, tactile, friendly, progressive group of which I am privileged to be a part.

**ACDIS: What pieces of advice would you offer to a new CDI specialist?**

**Berthold:** Patience is a huge benefit, both to provide for yourself in terms of giving yourself time to arc and flower, but also in your teaching and attempts at culture shift.

Pay attention to compliance. It can feel frustrating at first, but it’s really the thing that keeps us honest and respectful in our roles as CDI specialists. Learn its hows and whys. It’s an underrated but very important aspect in every conversation we have.

Let the chart give you what it gives you. Don’t take an agenda in with you.

Remember to phone a friend if you get stuck, if you get beat up and need a laugh, if you’re feeling unsure, or if you just need a sounding board. For many people, this discipline can feel oddly autonomous. Just remember you are never alone.
Be creatively assertive, not ruthlessly aggressive.

Be kind. Always.

**ACDIS: If you could have any other job, what would it be?**

**Berthold:** As a young lad, I wanted to be a baseball player. In my teens, a rock star/musician. Always, a writer.

**ACDIS: What was your first job?**

**Berthold:** I walked neighborhood dogs and delivered newspapers.

I also worked as a burger flipper and fry guy. Financially, it was the pits, but in terms of friendships and fun, it was the best. It taught me teamwork, and that hard work and a light heart can be its own reward. I still have friendships to this day from those two years.

**ACDIS: Can you tell us about a few of your favorite things?**

- **Vacation spots:** Ireland, camping almost anywhere, treehouses.
- **Hobbies:** Laughing and listening, reading and writing, music, collecting signed first edition books, enlarging my circle of family and friends.
- **Non-alcoholic beverage:** Coffee jolts. Tea heals. Water is life.
- **Foods:** I love to cook. Mostly, I enjoy recreating and adding my touches to our old family recipes and recently I have been exploring pan-Asian cooking, root vegetables from all over the world, and varieties of mushrooms.
- **Activities:** My favorite days are communal gatherings that take their own path (private selves made slightly public). I love Ireland for the family pub sessions of both stories and song, cooking that expands on traditions but remains respectful of source, and cosmically dancing around the fire and a bit of howling at the moon. Any day that ends in a “kitchen party” is a good day. Also, there is NEVER ENOUGH time to catch up on reading...

**ACDIS: Tell us about your family and how you like to spend your time away from CDI.**

**Berthold:** I’m the middle child of three, and three years separate us all; I have an older sister, Maryann, and a younger brother, Michael.

From my mom, I got her love of reading and music. From my father, who was my coach in reference to baseball and in being a man, I got my ridiculous sense of humor, my love of people and music, and a crazy head of hair.

I come from a tiny family. German and Irish by culture. I married into a very large Irish family. It took me a few years to learn all their names, and every time you turn around there’s another to learn. We never go hungry nor lonely.

I’ve been married to my wife, Bridgid, for 26 years. She does her best to keep me alive and has, over the years, perfected the art of laughing out loud while also shaking her head from side to side. My son, Chris, is married to a lovely woman, Amanda, and lives in Florida (somehow, he survived me and turned out to be a pretty spectacular human whom I love to spend time alongside).

We’ve had as many as three dogs (I would be unable to keep from adopting untold numbers if left to my own devices), although we currently only have one (shout out to Riley Roo!) and I am always openly recruiting.