How to Work With Ambiguous Records

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Ambiguous medical records are one of the most challenging parts of LNC work. And they're also where strong analytical habits really show. Experienced LNCs don't just "fill in the blanks"; they triangulate information until the ambiguity becomes a pattern they can explain or flag for the attorney.

Here's how new LNCs can deal with ambiguous medical records:

1. Identify the ambiguity

Define what's unclear - missing dates, contradictory notes, unexplained medication changes, inconsistent vital signs, etc. Ambiguity isn't just absence; it's inconsistency.

2. Cross-reference sources

Compare information across:

- provider documentation such as physician notes, nursing flowsheets, ancillary reports
- chronological context - what happened before and after the unclear entry
- external records like labs, imaging, or transfer summaries that may clarify timing or intent

3. Reconstruct the clinical logic

Instead of guessing, ask: *What would a reasonable clinician have done next?* Use clinical reasoning to infer whether the ambiguity reflects a documentation error, workflow gap, or genuine uncertainty in care.

4. Document the ambiguity transparently

Never "fix" the record. Instead, annotate it:

"Documentation conflict noted between nursing note (8/12) and physician progress note (8/13). Unable to confirm sequence of events."

This preserves objectivity and signals the issue clearly to the attorney.

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5. Communicate implications

Ambiguity often affects causation, timeline, or standard-of-care analysis. Highlight how the uncertainty might influence case theory — not by speculating, but by showing where the record stops supporting conclusions.

6. Recommend next steps

New LNCs might suggest:

- obtaining missing provider records
- requesting audit trails or metadata
- seeking staff clarification – meetings or phone conferences (defense) or deposition-based (plaintiff)
- comparing EMR timestamps to handwritten notes

The takeaway

Ambiguity isn't a flaw in the record. It's a signal. Experienced LNCs learn to treat unclear documentation as an opportunity to investigate, correlate, and clarify. New LNCs can do the same by relying on structured analysis rather than instinct. When you approach ambiguity methodically, you turn confusion into clarity and give attorneys insights they can actually use.

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