



**Question:** *If a radiologist uses the phrase “consistent with” in his report can I code the condition as a definitive diagnosis?*

**Answer:** For some time radiology coders have been debating the semantics of language utilized by radiologists in documenting their findings in diagnostic exams. Two common phrases used by many radiologists include “compatible with” and “consistent with”. Absent written guidance many facilities discussed this conundrum with their radiologists. The outcome of these discussions led some facilities to the adopt written policies stating that conditions preceded by these phrases should be coded as such and even those facilities that didn’t adopt written policies continued to code conditions documented with these phrases as definitive diagnoses.

The recent issue of Coding Clinic (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2005), published by the American Hospital Association has now provided official coding advice on this very issue stating that these terms fit the definition of probable or suspected conditions. Other phrases that fit this definition include “indicative of,” “suggestive of,” and “comparable with.”

According to the “Diagnostic Coding & Reporting Guidelines for Outpatient Services” do not code diagnoses documented as "probable", "suspected," "questionable," "rule out," or "working diagnosis". Rather, code the condition(s) to the highest degree of certainty for that encounter/visit, such as symptoms, signs, abnormal test results, or other reason for the visit.

Based on this current advice it is recommended that policies and procedures be updated to reflect this current advice all radiology coders should be educated on this issue.