

Genetic Counselor



Occupational Description

The genetic counselor is a health professional academically and clinically prepared to provide genetic services to individuals and families seeking information about the occurrence, or risk of occurrence, of a genetic condition or birth defect. Practicing as part of a genetic services delivery team, the genetic counselor communicates genetic, medical, and technical information in a comprehensive, understandable, nondirective manner with knowledge of and insight into the psychosocial and ethnocultural experiences important to each client and family. The counselor provides client-centered, supportive counseling regarding the issues, concerns, and experiences meaningful to the client's circumstances.



Job Description

The predominant activity of genetic counselors is consulting with individuals (and/or their families) with birth defects or genetic disorders and who may be at risk for a variety of inherited conditions. They identify families at risk, investigate the problem(s) present in the family, interpret information about the disorder, analyze inheritance patterns and risks of recurrence, and review available options with the family. Genetic counselors also provide supportive counseling to families, serve as patient advocates, and refer individuals and families to community or state support services. They serve as educators and resource people for other health care professionals and for the general public. Some counselors also work in administrative capacities. Many engage in research activities related to the field of medical genetics and genetic counseling.

In addition to direct contact with couples and individuals to provide genetic counseling services, most genetic counselors devote professional time to medical professional education, public education, grant writing, and research, as well as serving on national genetics and related professional boards and national, state, and regional health/genetic services delivery committees.



Employment Characteristics

Genetic counselors work in a variety of health care settings. Most commonly, they are employed in major medical centers in prenatal, pediatric, or adult settings. According to the 1998 Professional Status Survey, conducted in May 1998 by the National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC), more than 70% of all counselors work in university medical centers, private hospitals, and medical facilities. The rest are employed in approximately equal amounts by managed care organizations, diagnostic laboratories, federal and state government offices, public health agencies, private practice, and outreach clinics.

The genetic counseling profession is rapidly expanding and diversifying, most notably into adult common conditions, such as cancer, neurogenetics, psychiatric disorders, and cardiology.

According to the NSGC's 1998 Professional Status Survey, the mean (average) beginning salaries for genetic counselors with up to 5 years' experience is \$38,134, with a minimum of \$18,000 and a maximum of \$57,876. Salaries will vary by location and are highest in California, New York, and New Jersey and lowest in the southeastern United States.



Educational Programs

Length. These postbaccalaureate programs take 2 years to complete.

Prerequisites. Applicants should have a baccalaureate degree that includes appropriate coursework as specified by the institution. Most commonly, genetic counselors enter master's degree programs in genetic counseling with undergraduate degrees in biology/biosciences, psychology, or genetics.

Curriculum. Principles and applications of human genetics and related sciences; principles and practice of clinical/medical genetics; methods of genetic testing; theory and application of interviewing and counseling; social, ethical, and legal issues as they pertain to the delivery of genetic services; healthcare delivery systems and principles of public health; teaching skills; and research methods.



Inquiries

Careers

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Certification

The ABGC began certifying genetic counselors in 1993. From 1982 to 1990, genetic counselors were certified by the American Board of Medical Genetics. Inquiries regarding certification in genetic counseling should be directed in writing to:
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