

Genetic Counselor

Genetic counselors are specialized health care professionals who work at the crossroads of medicine, technology, and bioethics. They facilitate the translation of genetic discoveries to everyday medical care by working with individuals and families seeking information about medical conditions that have a genetic contribution.



Career Description

As health care professionals, genetic counselors interpret and provide clear and comprehensive information about the risk of any medical condition that may have a genetic contribution. This involves collecting and interpreting family, medical, and psychosocial history information. Analysis of this history information together with an understanding of genetic principles and the knowledge of current technologies provide individuals and their families with information about risk, prognosis, medical management, and diagnostic and prevention options. Genetic counselors facilitate an informed decision-making process that elicits and respects the spectrum of personal beliefs and values that exist in society.



Employment Characteristics

Genetic counselors practice as part of a health care team. The settings in which genetic counselors work include hospitals and medical centers, public health agencies, colleges and universities, diagnostic laboratories, biotechnology companies, research institutions, private practice, and governmental agencies.

According to the 2006 Professional Status Survey (PSS), conducted by the National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC), 69% of all genetic counselors work in university medical centers, private hospitals, and medical facilities.

Prenatal, cancer, pediatric, and adult are the most common specialty areas in which genetic counselors work, according to the 2006 PSS. Examples of other specialty areas include neurogenetics, psychiatry, cardiology, infertility, laboratory testing/screening, and disease-specific clinics.

In addition to health care, advances made by the Human Genome Project have relevance in many other areas. As a result, genetic counselors have expanded and adapted their skills into areas such as research, industry, education, policy, public health, administration, and advocacy work.



Salary

According to the 2006 PSS, the yearly gross salaries reported by survey respondents range from \$20,000 to \$150,000, with an average of \$59,000. Salaries vary by location and are highest in California, New York, and New Jersey and lowest in the southeastern United States. For more information, refer to www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary.



Educational Programs

Length. Genetic counselors have a master's degree from a graduate program specifically designed to prepare individuals for a career as a genetic counselor.

The training is specialized and includes coursework and hands-on supervised clinical experiences.

Curriculum. The coursework includes instruction in the following general content areas:

- Human, medical, and clinical genetics
- Psychosocial theory and techniques
- Social, ethical, and legal issues
- Health care delivery systems and public health principles
- Teaching techniques
- Research methods

The supervised clinical experiences provide students with diversified clinical training and give them experience working with individuals and families affected with a broad range of genetic disorders and counseling situations. This clinical training is important in exposing students to the natural history and management of and psychosocial issues associated with common genetic conditions and birth defects. Students also obtain experience in teaching, laboratory methods, and research.

The American Board of Genetic Counseling accredits graduate programs in genetic counseling.



Inquiries

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