

POLICY BRIEF

Licensure for Genetic Counselors in Oregon

THE ISSUE

Technological advances have dramatically increased patient access to complex genetic health information. Consumers make health care decisions based on information that is increasingly hard for a layperson to understand. Genetic counselors can tell people how genetic information might impact their health. This brief describes what genetic counselors do, and explains how Oregonians would benefit if they are licensed.

THE BACKGROUND

Genetic counselors are allied health professionals who work as part of a health care team. They play an important role in providing comprehensive health care, including the prevention and management of genetic conditions. Genetic counselors earn graduate degrees that equip them with skills in both medical genetics and counseling. They assess, educate, and support to people who have inherited health conditions, or who are at risk for them. Genetic counselors interpret genetic test results, and communicate them in language patients understand.

As we learn more every day about how genes influence diseases and disorders, health care providers have ever-increasing need for the skills that genetic counselors offer their patients.

THE POTENTIAL

Improved Quality of Care: A state licensure requirement would guarantee that unlicensed genetic counselors don't practice in Oregon. It sets a higher standard and allows for more frequent review of competence than current national certification.



Genetic factors contribute to 70% of pediatric hospital admissions, and 30% of premature deaths.

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Increased Access to Care: Eleven states currently license their genetic counselors, and seven other states have introduced licensure bills. States that instituted a licensure requirement saw an increase in the number of practicing genetic counselors. In states where genetic counselors are licensed, physicians can bill Medicaid for the service, making it feasible for more medical practices to offer genetic counseling. This is especially important in rural Oregon, where genetic counseling services are in short supply.

The Affordable Care Act requires that women at risk for hereditary breast or ovarian cancer be provided with genetic counseling. Increasing the number and quality of genetic counselors will give Oregon women reliable access to the genetic counseling to which they are entitled.

Additionally, one in five Oregon families has a child with special health needs. Many of these families need counseling to help them understand the role of genetics in their child's condition, and to make better-informed health care decisions.

60% of physicians practicing more than 80 miles from Portland cited "lack of access" as their reason for not referring patients at high risk of hereditary cancer to a genetic specialist.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Genetic counselors help patients and health care providers make sound, well-informed medical decisions. The need for knowledgeable, professional genetic counseling is already high, and will only increase as the science of genetics moves forward. To ensure that all Oregonians have ongoing access to quality genetic counseling, Oregon should institute a licensure requirement.

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"Genetic counselors provide accurate, up-to-date interpretations of available patient data, and reliable assessment and planning. There is no way we could know everything that the genetic counselors know."

– Obstetrician/Gynecologist (from nsgc.org)