

**COMMENTARY**

# Genetic counseling clinical supervision – A call to action

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**KEYWORDS:** clinical supervision, education, genetic counseling, Hippocratic Oath, reflective practice, supervision, workforce

The modern version of the Hippocratic Oath is still in use at many medical schools and includes statements about expected physician conduct with patients, society, and medicine (The Hippocratic Oath: Modern Version, 1964). The oath comes from a perspective of humility and altruism. For example, physicians are sworn to avoid

...those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism” and to not “be ashamed to say “I know not,” nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient’s recovery.

Patient care extends beyond treatment and physicians must remember

...that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon’s knife or the chemist’s drug

As meaningful as these statements are, they are not the first act a new physician promises to uphold. The very first act that is sworn to in this covenant is that they

...will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.

This begs the question; did the various writers who had hands in crafting the modern oath of today intentionally organize it with this primary responsibility at the top of their list? One could argue that is where it belongs because without competent providers to ‘share their knowledge’ with the next generation of providers the other activities in the oath would not be sustainable. There would be no next generation. Where, then, is this promise in the genetic counseling profession – the promise to help train our future colleagues?

Genetic counselors have many documents that guide conduct, including the National Society of Genetic Counselors’ (NSGC) Code of Ethics (COE), and the Accreditation Council of Genetic Counseling (ACGC) Practice-based Competencies (PBC). These documents each reference student supervision as shown in Table 1.

Both the COE and the PBC either explicitly state or imply genetic counselors have a duty to supervise or work with genetic counseling students. What genetic counselors do not have, however, is an oath or formal position on student supervision. If there were a formal statement, there would no longer be a question of whether or not genetic counselors promise to ‘gladly share...with those who follow’ as it would be a professional obligation.

The NSGC Professional Status Survey (PSS) documents the commitment of the profession to genetic counseling students. According to the 2018 NSGC PSS (Work Environment Report), 38% of genetic counselors in direct patient care positions indicated that one of the roles within their primary area of practice was student supervision; 22% also indicated they had teaching/education roles. Overall, PSS respondents in direct care positions estimated they spent 9% of their time on student supervision and 8% on teaching/education. Clearly, a significant portion of genetic counselors are spending time training and educating the future generation. But, is the promise ‘to share our knowledge’ *at the top of the list of genetic counselor obligations as it is for physicians?* The answer to this question has particular meaning for our profession in the current workforce environment.

Genetic counselors have a mandate to grow the workforce. A Genetic Counselor Workforce Work Group (WFWG) was convened in 2013 and included five United States-based genetic organizations: Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling, American Board of Genetic Counselors, American Society of Human Genetics, Association of Genetic Counseling Program Directors, and National Society of Genetic Counselors. The interorganizational group was charged with identifying barriers to expanding the workforce and developing actionable strategies for addressing the barriers. With the help of Dobson/DaVanzo,

**TABLE 1** Genetic counselor responsibility to be a supervisor: NSGC Code of Ethics, ACGC, and CAGC Practice-Based Competencies

Code of Ethics	The genetic counselors' relationships with other genetic counselors, trainees, employees, employers, and other professionals are based on mutual respect, caring, collaboration, fidelity, veracity, and support. Therefore, genetic counselors work to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Share their knowledge and provide mentorship and guidance for the professional development of other genetic counselors, employees, trainees, and other professionals.</li> <li>2. Respect and value the knowledge, perspectives, contributions, and areas of competence of colleagues, trainees, and other professionals.</li> <li>3. Assure individuals under their supervision undertake responsibilities that are commensurate with their knowledge, experience, and training.</li> <li>4. Maintain appropriate boundaries to avoid exploitation in their relationships with trainees, employees, employers, and colleagues.</li> </ol> (NSGC COE, 2017, p. 2)
Practice-based competencies	Domain IV: Professional Development & Practice <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. Understand the methods, roles and responsibilities of the process of clinical supervision of trainees. (ACGC PBC, 2015, p. 2)</li> </ol> Note: CAGC also recognizes the importance of supervision in their PBC with the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.4.4 Support health care students to meet their learning objectives, in cooperation with other members of the health care team. (PBC CAGC, 2012, p. 9)</li> <li>3.5.2 Act as a resource person, educator, advocate and/or mentor for students, health care professionals and the community. (PBC CAGC, 2012, p. 11)</li> </ol>

Abbreviations: ACGC, Accreditation Council for Genetic Counseling; CAGC, Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors; COE, Code of Ethics; NSGC, National Society of Genetic Counselors; PBC, Practice-Based Competencies.

LLC, the WFWG published a workforce supply and demand study of United States-based certified genetic counselors in a 10-year period (2017–2026). The study showed that there is a shortage of genetic counselors in direct patient care positions and that the number of genetic counseling position overall is expected to grow given expanded employment opportunities. The study estimated that the shortage could extend as long as 2030. The WFWG identified three strategic areas of focus to address the shortage. The second strategy is directly related to clinical supervision, the goal being to 'Build and support a robust network of clinical supervisors available to meet the training needs of the growing number of genetic counseling students and to support the future certified genetic counselor workforce' (WFWG, 2017, p. 9).

Beyond the issue of workforce growth an equally compelling reason to accept supervision responsibilities is for personal professional development. Per the ACGC practice-based competencies, genetic counselors should 'demonstrate a self-reflective, evidence-based, and current approach to genetic counseling practice.' One way to achieve this competency is 'to seek feedback and respond to performance critique.' Supervising genetic counseling students provides an opportunity for practicing professionals to receive feedback from a person (student) directly involved with the session. Supervising also requires operating from a 'reflective stance' (Skovholt, 2001, p. 28), in which supervisee questions are valued and encouraged. Lastly, engaging in discussion around a particular session forces genetic counselors to intentionally examine why they do things in a certain way and explain their actions and behaviors, thus modeling a reflective stance to their supervisee.

Supervision does take time and energy. Also, genetic counselors are often expected to supervise trainees from other disciplines, specifically medical students and residents. But supervision also comes with rewards. Genetic counselors can receive professional activity credits for supervision and many training programs provide specific supervision continuing education opportunities both of which count toward maintenance of certification. Finally, supervision can assist with one's professional development as well as advancement; for example, clinical teaching may be a path to faculty status in some institutions.

Only genetic counselors can impart to students the art and skill of genetic counseling. For those already supervising students, know that you are valued and appreciated by your trainees, your profession, your colleagues, and genetic counseling programs. Encourage colleagues to get involved by mentoring them and sharing the personal and professional value of this activity. For those who are not yet supervising, consider volunteering your skills, as it is critical that the percentage of genetic counselors who supervise increases for both the continued growth of the genetic counseling profession and the development of future genetic counselors. Just as important, recognize that supervision helps enhance reflective practice and contributes to *personal* professional development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This commentary was supported by the Association of Genetic Counselor Program Directors (AGCPD) and the AGCPD Clinical Training Taskforce, of which the author was a member. The author would like to thank Angie Trepanier, AGCPD President,

Monica Marvin and Gretchen Schneider, Taskforce co-chairs, and Cheryl Shuman, Taskforce member for their editorial assistance.

## COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

### Conflict of interest

Catherine A. Reiser declares that she has no conflict of interest.

### Human studies and informed consent

No human studies were carried out by the author for this article.

### Animal studies

No animal studies were carried out by the author for this article.

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