

Exploring Barriers to Payor Utilization of Genetic Counselors

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The genetic counselor's purview has expanded in parallel with increased understanding of genetics' role in disease. However, access to genetic counselors' services is neither universal nor automatic, thanks in part to the gatekeeper role of healthcare payors – the companies and agencies that purchase healthcare services on patients' behalf and control the bulk of healthcare spending. Many possible barriers to payors' expanded coverage of genetic counselors can be hypothesized, from credentialing to lack of conviction that genetic counselors save the system money. This pilot study is believed to be the first to systematically survey, document, and analyze the relative importance of these factors. Surveys were mailed to 263 Medical Directors and Quality Assurance Directors at health insurance carriers throughout the United States. Respondents provided demographic information and indicated the importance of nine possible barriers, plus an optional write-in "other," to expanded coverage of genetic counselors' services. 22 surveys were analyzed. "Evidence that use of genetic counselors improves health outcomes" led the list of factors having a significant/very significant influence on coverage policy. Sixteen respondents (73%) rated this factor "4" or "5" on a Likert scale; it also received the most #1 rankings (nine), and the highest score (4.3 out of a possible 5) using a weighted-mean analysis. Provider practice guidelines, CMS/Medicare regulations, and genetic counselor licensure -- all of which are outside of payors' direct control -- also ranked highly. The research demonstrates that although the potential barriers to expanded reimbursement for genetic counselors are numerous and complex, some are more consistently identified as important and therefore more deserving of legislative and advocacy resources to effect change. Future research that takes steps to increase survey responses, and that includes providers as well as payors, may further inform initiatives to expand reimbursement for genetic counselors.