

Experiences of Genetic Counselors Practicing in Rural Areas

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In-person genetic counseling clinics in rural areas are likely to improve access to genetic counseling in underserved regions, but studies have not previously examined how these clinics function or described the experience of practicing in a rural setting. The present mixed-methods study explored the professional experiences of clinical genetic counselors who practice in rural areas, including the benefits and challenges of practicing in these settings and the counselors' motivations for doing so. The authors surveyed 20 genetic counselors who self-reported working in rural areas and conducted interviews with six individuals whose workplaces were confirmed as rural per RUCA code. Major obstacles to the provision of genetics services in rural areas included travel distance and low referral rates due to lack of awareness or skepticism. Facilitating factors included relying on resources such as professional networks and prioritizing outreach and education. Participants reported high professional satisfaction and were motivated to work in rural areas by personal experiences and qualities of the job such as being a generalist and having greater professional autonomy. These data demonstrate the feasibility of practicing in rural settings and suggest that in-person rural genetic counseling clinics may complement other strategies such as alternative service delivery models in increasing access for rural residents.