

Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors

Association Canadienne des Conseillers en Génétique

Practice Based Competencies For Canadian Genetic Counsellors





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Preamble

The Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors (CAGC) has been officially incorporated since 1990. The mission of the CAGC is to promote high standards of practice, encourage professional growth and increase public awareness of the genetic counselling profession in Canada.

In Canada genetic counsellors are currently unregulated professionals, having no provincial or territorial legislation to govern safe, competent, and ethical practice in the interest of public protection. In response to membership concerns regarding a lack of practice standards for genetic counsellors in Canada, the CAGC committed to developing national competencies in 2006. These competencies are intended to be used by and apply to genetic counsellors working in Canada.

Background

Genetic counsellors are non-physician health professionals with specialized training and experience in the areas of medical genetics and counselling. Genetic counsellors often work as members of a healthcare team in a medical genetics program or other medical specialty, providing information and support to individuals and families who have, or are at risk for, genetic conditions. Genetic counsellors help patients and their families appreciate the nature, inheritance, and implications of genetic conditions to facilitate informed medical and personal decisions and promote an understanding and adaptation to the associated medical, psychological, and familial implications.

Genetic counsellors serve as both educators and as a resource for other healthcare professionals, students, and for the general public. Genetic counsellors work in collaboration with a variety of health care providers, researchers, scientists and educators in order to ensure the best possible delivery of genetic services. Increasingly, genetic counsellors are working within both public and private health related institutions in roles such as administration, marketing, consulting, and research.

The field of medical genetics is relatively new, and genetic counselling was historically provided by health care professionals with backgrounds in related fields such as nursing or social work, with employment experience in medical genetics and genetic counselling. With the establishment of graduate level genetic counselling training programs, most genetic counsellors practising today have completed a Masters degree in genetic counselling. The majority of genetic counsellors voluntarily achieve certification through at least one of two certification boards (the CAGC and/or the American Board of Genetic Counseling). Canadian employers are increasingly expecting that genetic counsellors either meet a standard of board certification or are eligible to do so, and demonstrate core-competencies in day-to-day practice, often as a condition of employment.

Overview

With the rapid progress of genetic knowledge and technologies, the practice of genetic counsellors is expanding, becoming more recognized and increasingly in demand, and the need for uniform practice standards for the profession has become paramount.

In 2006 the CAGC established a Core Competency working group to deliberate and document the essential requisite competencies required by genetic counsellors in Canada to gain entry into the profession and provide professional services. The working group membership was chosen to be broad, inclusive and representative of region, role and experience among Canadian genetic counsellors.

The CAGC Practice Based Competencies framework was developed to describe the integrated skills, attitudes and judgment that genetic counsellors require in order to perform the services and duties that fall within the practice of the profession responsibly, safely, effectively and ethically. This framework was developed based on empirical research, educational paradigms and working group member consensus, and incorporated feedback from two validation cycles. The first occurred in 2010 and solicited a review from all members of the CAGC. The second took place in 2011 and considered the views of external stakeholders identified by the Core Competency working group and the CAGC Board of Directors, including directors of Canadian genetic counselling training programs, medical geneticists, molecular geneticists, cytogeneticists, biochemical geneticists, other physicians with experience working alongside genetic counsellors in multidisciplinary settings, clinical managers and administrators, researchers and policy makers with an interest in the field of medical genetics, as well as patients and patient support groups. The CAGC Board of Directors and Certification Board approved and adopted this framework in 2012.

It is expected that every genetic counsellor possess these competencies as a minimum requirement for practice. The degree of expertise in these competencies will vary among genetic counsellors depending on their own level of experience and individual practice settings. The competencies are intended to be broad, applying to all practising genetic counsellors regardless of designated role or setting, client population or practice environment.

The CAGC Practice Based Competencies sit alongside the CAGC Knowledge Based Competencies, and together these Core Competencies serve as a platform for practice guidelines, training curricula, certification, continuing competency, re-entry to practice and other quality assurance initiatives for genetic counsellors in Canada.

These competencies have been written assuming genetic counsellors will eventually be regulated professionals. In those jurisdictions where regulation occurs, these competencies may assist in the development of standards of practice for genetic counsellors.

Assumptions

1. Genetic counsellors are typically either Masters-level professionals who have successfully completed an accredited genetic counselling training program or are professionals with an equivalent combination of education and clinical genetic counselling experience, who have achieved, or are eligible to achieve, certification through either the CAGC or ABGC.
2. For the purpose of this document, the term client denotes any population receiving services from a genetic counsellor, including patients and their families, the general public, students, other members of the health care team, and government/non-governmental agencies or departments. The term collaborator denotes colleagues and other professionals working toward a common client-related goal.
3. Competencies are defined as the integrated knowledge, skills, attitudes and judgment expected of a genetic counsellor to practise safely and ethically in their designated role and setting.
4. Genetic counsellors' core competencies are common to all genetic counsellors and apply across all contexts of practice to meet the needs of the client being served.
5. It is understood that these competencies will be exercised within the specific legal, institutional and departmental conventions and limitations related to any particular position or jurisdiction.
6. It is recognized that the practices of Canadian genetic counsellors will continue to evolve with advancements in knowledge, technologies and in response to changes in health care environments. It is expected that the CAGC Core Competencies will be reviewed regularly, at the discretion of the CAGC Board of Directors, and revised as necessary to keep them current.

Competency Domains

The CAGC Practice Based Competencies framework identifies and describes three Domains that represent core competencies expected of genetic counsellors to practice in Canada:

1. Counselling and Communication
2. Genetic Expertise
3. Professionalism and Ethical Practice

1. COUNSELLING AND COMMUNICATION

Genetic counsellors have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitude and judgment to:

1.1 Effective Relationships

- 1.1.1 Demonstrate clear and professional communication in interactions with clients and collaborators.
- 1.1.2 Establish rapport with clients and identify and address barriers to communication.
- 1.1.3 Apply the principles of trust, respect, beneficence, honesty, and empathy to all client relationships.
- 1.1.4 Use client-centred principles in the communication process that respect and respond to clients' values, preferences, decisions or self-identified best interests.
- 1.1.5 Strive to achieve a mutual understanding of expectations and desired outcomes with clients.

1.2 Psychosocial Assessment

- 1.2.1 Utilize appropriate interviewing techniques to identify clients' expectations and major concerns.
- 1.2.2 Determine clients' sources of emotional and psychological support.
- 1.2.3 Explore clients' coping skills including decision-making strategies and capacity.

1.3 Psychosocial Support and Counselling

- 1.3.1 Use empathetic listening to establish rapport and formulate appropriate questions to encourage clients to engage in discussion.
- 1.3.2 Assess clients' understanding and response to medical and genetic information and its implications.
- 1.3.3 Respond appropriately to clients' emotional states.
- 1.3.4 Recognize when a clients' psychological state may benefit from appropriate interventions and/or referrals.

1.4 Awareness of Diversity

- 1.4.1 Recognize, acknowledge and respect differences relevant to client interactions, including but not limited to cultural, spiritual, physical, cognitive, political and sexual orientation.
- 1.4.2 Communicate and practise in a culturally sensitive manner.
- 1.4.3 Reflect on and address their own biases and cultural differences when interacting with clients.



1.5 Communication of Information

- 1.5.1 Elicit family, medical, genetic and other relevant information as appropriate.
- 1.5.2 Synthesize information and perspectives and communicate these within a mutually agreed plan.
- 1.5.3 Convey information to clients in a manner that meets their needs and levels of understanding.
- 1.5.4 Discuss available options, appropriate genetic tests and/or clinical assessments including the potential benefits, risks and limitations to enable clients to make informed decisions.
- 1.5.5 Provide clear oral and written information which is tailored to the needs of clients and collaborators and reflective of the services provided.

2. GENETIC EXPERTISE

Genetic counsellors have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitude and judgment to:

2.1 Effective Practice

- 2.1.1 Demonstrate an understanding of genetic counselling models, theories and approaches.
- 2.1.2 Understand the development and implementation of standards, practice guidelines, education, and research initiatives related to genetic counsellor practice.
- 2.1.3 Integrate genetic counselling skills with theoretical and scientific knowledge, as applicable in interactions with clients.
- 2.1.4 Provide safe, efficient and effective genetic counselling services.

2.2 Critical Thinking

- 2.2.1 Evaluate and summarize pertinent data from the published literature, databases, and other professional resources.
- 2.2.2 Synthesize relevant information as the basis for assessing risk potential, screening and testing options, reproductive options, and follow-up recommendations, in conjunction with collaborators.
- 2.2.3 Assess and calculate the risk of occurrence/recurrence of a genetic condition or congenital anomaly using a variety of techniques (inheritance patterns, epidemiologic data, quantitative genetic principles and/or statistical models).
- 2.2.4 Identify and access local, national and international resources such as support groups and other services as appropriate for specific genetic conditions.
- 2.2.5 Evaluate the applicability and relevance of research and evidence-based practice findings and, where appropriate, apply these findings to practice.
- 2.2.6 Evaluate and interpret issues for clients relating to research participation including risks, benefits and limitations.

2.3 Clinical Case Management

- 2.3.1 Analyze and accurately interpret genetic and family data.
- 2.3.2 Understand relevant medical details as related to clinical cases and genetic conditions.
- 2.3.3 Design, implement and periodically assess genetic counselling case management plans.
- 2.3.4 Explain options and facilitate appropriate screening and testing.
- 2.3.5 Facilitate decision making of clients that is informed and meets their needs.
- 2.3.6 Follow up with clients, laboratories and/or other professionals as necessary.
- 2.3.7 Document medical and genetic counselling information appropriately.
- 2.3.8 Recognize circumstances in which the input of other members of the healthcare team would contribute to and enhance case management.

2.4 Education

- 2.4.1 Act as a reliable source for current medical genetics information for clients and collaborators.
- 2.4.2 Tailor, explain and communicate complex information in order to meet the learning needs of various clients and collaborators.
- 2.4.3 Share knowledge with collaborators to contribute to their professional development.
- 2.4.4 Support health care students to meet their learning objectives, in cooperation with other members of the health care team.

2.5 Research

- 2.5.1 Identify and/or develop research questions to address knowledge gaps.
- 2.5.2 Contribute to the design of research studies.
- 2.5.3 Understand the need for and process involved in obtaining appropriate ethics review board approval.
- 2.5.4 Develop and maintain research materials including consent forms and information sheets.
- 2.5.5 Facilitate client participation in research.
- 2.5.6 Partake in the collection and analysis of data.
- 2.5.7 Participate in manuscript preparation.
- 2.5.8 Present research to clients, collaborators and academic audiences.
- 2.5.9 Support a culture of research within the genetic counselling discipline as well as with interdisciplinary teams.

3. PROFESSIONALISM AND ETHICAL PRACTICE

Genetic counsellors have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitude and judgment to:

3.1 Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Teamwork

- 3.1.1 Participate productively in a team environment and understand their own role and the roles of other professionals with whom they interact.
- 3.1.2 Establish and maintain professional relationships with key individuals, organizations and groups to facilitate the provision of service.
- 3.1.3 Seek, respect, consider and be receptive to the information and opinions of clients and collaborators.
- 3.1.4 Act as a consultant for other genetic counsellors and health care professionals.
- 3.1.5 Demonstrate effective interpersonal communication skills in collaborative and interdisciplinary practice.
- 3.1.6 Request and obtain consultative assistance or referral when appropriate.
- 3.1.7 Encourage mechanisms for support within the profession.

3.2 Professional Growth

- 3.2.1 Reflect on and evaluate their own practice, recognizing limitations in knowledge and level of competence.
- 3.2.2 Engage in life-long learning to gain new knowledge, skills and behaviours.
- 3.2.3 Keep abreast of new practice standards and evidence-based research advances, as well as scientific and societal developments.

3.3 Ethical Practice

- 3.3.1 Be aware of and act in accordance with the ethical and legal principles and values of the profession.
- 3.3.2 Be familiar with issues surrounding privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, real or potential discrimination, self-determination and other legal/ethical matters related to the collection, use, disclosure and exchange of genetic information.
- 3.3.3 Maintain appropriate confidentiality and security in the transmission, storage, management and discussion of professional issues and clinical and research information.
- 3.3.4 Recognize their own values and biases in relating to clients.
- 3.3.5 Identify and react to ethical dilemmas arising in practice and seek assistance as needed from experts in these areas.



3.4 Public Health and Advocacy

- 3.4.1 Identify and respond to the medical genetic needs of populations to promote health and well-being.
- 3.4.2 Advocate for clients by representing their interests in the medical and social service systems and community.
- 3.4.3 Demonstrate an awareness of resource allocation and cost-effectiveness in making decisions related to relevant diagnostics and therapeutic interventions.
- 3.4.4 Recognize the benefit of genetic counsellor participation in public health policy development and be aware of key issues that may influence practices and health services.
- 3.4.5 Explain and promote the role of the genetic counsellor to clients, the public, legislators, policy makers and other health care professionals.

3.5 Leadership

- 3.5.1 Demonstrate appropriate organization and management skills in order to successfully manage clients, projects, and programs.
- 3.5.2 Act as a resource person, educator, advocate and/or mentor for students, health care professionals and the community.
- 3.5.3 Assess quality of services provided and identify opportunities for improvement and strengths upon which to build.
- 3.5.4 Support an organizational culture that facilitates professional growth, continuous learning, and collaborative practice.
- 3.5.5 Recognize evolving arenas in medical genomics and health care in order to identify the potential for growth within the profession as well as for integration of genetic counsellor practice into new roles.