

National Society of Genetic Counselors Code of Ethics

The National Society of Genetic Counselors

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Abstract This document is the revised Code of Ethics of the National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC) that was adopted in April 2017 after majority vote of the full membership of the NSGC. The explication of the revisions is published in this volume of the Journal of Genetic Counseling. This is the fourth revision to the Code of Ethics since its original adoption in 1992.

Keywords Code of ethics · Genetic counseling · National Society of genetic counselors

NSGC Code of Ethics

A Code of Ethics is a document which attempts to clarify and guide the conduct of a professional so that the goals and values of the profession might best be served.

Preamble

Genetic counselors are health professionals with specialized education, training, and experience in medical genetics and counseling. The National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC) is the leading voice, authority and advocate for the genetic counseling profession. Through this code of ethics, the NSGC affirms the ethical responsibilities of its members.

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NSGC members are expected to be aware of the ethical implications of their professional actions and work to uphold and adhere to the guidelines and principles set forth in this code.

Introduction

A code of ethics is a document that attempts to clarify and guide the conduct of a professional so that the goals and values of the profession are best served. The NSGC Code of Ethics is based upon the distinct relationships genetic counselors have with 1) themselves, 2) their clients, 3) their colleagues, and 4) society. Each section of this code begins with an explanation of the relevant relationship, along with the key values and characteristics of that relationship. These values are drawn from the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice, and they include the professional principles of fidelity, veracity, integrity, dignity and accountability.

No set of guidelines can provide all the assistance needed in every situation, especially when different values appear to conflict. In certain areas, some ambiguity remains, allowing for the judgement of the genetic counselor(s) involved to determine how best to respond to difficult situations.

Section I: Genetic Counselors Themselves

Genetic counselors value professionalism, competence, integrity, objectivity, veracity, dignity, accountability and self-respect in themselves as well as in each other. Therefore, genetic counselors work to:

1. Seek out and acquire balanced, accurate and relevant information required for a given situation.

2. Continue their education and training to keep abreast of relevant guidelines, regulations, position statements, and standards of genetic counseling practice.
3. Work within their scope of professional practice and recognize the limits of their own knowledge, expertise, and competence.
4. Accurately represent their experience, competence, and credentials, including academic degrees, certification, licensure, and relevant training.
5. Identify and adhere to institutional and professional conflict of interest guidelines and develop mechanisms for avoiding or managing real or perceived conflict of interest when it arises
6. Acknowledge and disclose to relevant parties the circumstances that may interfere with or influence professional judgment or objectivity, or may otherwise result in a real or perceived conflict of interest.
7. Assure that institutional or professional privilege is not used for personal gain.
8. Be responsible for their own physical and emotional health as it impacts their professional judgment and performance, including seeking professional support, as needed.

Section II: Genetic Counselors and their Clients

The counselor-client relationship is based on values of care and respect for the client's autonomy, individuality, welfare, and freedom in clinical and research interactions. Therefore, genetic counselors work to:

1. Provide genetic counseling services to their clients within their scope of practice regardless of personal interests or biases, and refer clients, as needed, to appropriately qualified professionals.
2. Clarify and define their professional role(s) and relationships with clients, disclose any real or perceived conflict of interest, and provide an accurate description of their services.
3. Provide genetic counseling services to their clients regardless of their clients' abilities, age, culture, religion, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation and gender identity.
4. Enable their clients to make informed decisions, free of coercion, by providing or illuminating the necessary facts, and clarifying the alternatives and anticipated consequences.
5. Respect their clients' beliefs, inclinations, circumstances, feelings, family relationships, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, and cultural traditions.
6. Refer clients to an alternate genetic counselor or other qualified professional when situations arise in which a genetic counselor's personal values, attitudes and beliefs may impede his or her ability to counsel a client.

7. Maintain the privacy and security of their client's confidential information and individually identifiable health information, unless released by the client or disclosure is required by law.
8. Avoid the exploitation of their clients for personal, professional, or institutional advantage, profit or interest.

Section III: Genetic Counselors and their Colleagues

The genetic counselors' professional 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:

1. Share their knowledge and provide mentorship and guidance for the professional development of other genetic counselors, employees, trainees and colleagues.
2. Respect and value the knowledge, perspectives, contributions, and areas of competence of colleagues, trainees and other professionals.
3. Encourage ethical behavior of colleagues.
4. Assure that individuals under their supervision undertake responsibilities that are commensurate with their knowledge, experience and training.
5. Maintain appropriate boundaries to avoid exploitation in their relationships with trainees, employees, employers and colleagues.
6. Take responsibility and credit only for work they have actually performed and to which they have contributed
7. Appropriately acknowledge the work and contributions of others.
8. Make employers aware of genetic counselors' ethical obligations as set forth in the NSGC Code of Ethics.

Section IV: Genetic Counselors and Society

The relationships of genetic counselors with society include interest and participation in activities that have the purpose of promoting the well-being of society and access to genetic services and health care. These relationships are based on the principles of veracity, objectivity and integrity. Therefore, genetic counselors, individually or through their professional organizations, work to:

1. Promote policies that aim to prevent genetic discrimination and oppose the use of genetic information as a basis for discrimination.

2. Serve as a source of reliable information and expert opinion on genetic counseling to employers, policymakers, payers, and public officials. When speaking publically on such matters, a genetic counselor should be careful to separate their personal statements and opinions made as private individuals from statements made on behalf of their employers or professional societies.
3. Participate in educating the public about the development and application of technological and scientific advances in genetics and the potential societal impact of these advances.
4. Promote policies that assure ethically responsible research in the context of genetics.
5. Adhere to applicable laws and regulations. However, when such laws are in conflict with the principles of the profession, genetic counselors work toward change that will benefit the public interest.