

Enhancing Medicare Beneficiary Access to Genetic Counselor Services

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Issue: Genetic counselors are experts who work collaboratively as part of the medical team with patients receiving or considering genetic testing, offering comprehensive genetic counseling services. Medicare beneficiaries facing genetic conditions are denied direct access to highly trained genetic counselors who can help them navigate the complex factors affecting their health. Medicare law needs to be updated to provide beneficiaries direct access to the services of genetic counselors to ensure patients receive the counseling they need to make the right decisions about their care.

Genetic Counselors Offer Critical Support to Patients and Providers

- The National Institutes of Health (NIH) states that genetic counselors can help patients by “providing information about the pros and cons” of genetic testing, guiding them through the complicated testing process.
- The services of genetic counselors are increasingly important to patients and providers given advances in genetic testing:
 - Approximately ten new genetic tests become available daily, according to research recently published in *Health Affairs* – these new tests add to the 10,000 different types of genetic testing currently available.
 - Genetic testing is becoming more complex, evolving “from single-gene tests toward more complex tests that measure multiple genes,” according to the *Health Affairs* published study.
 - The NIH emphasizes that genetic testing “will help to detect risk for disease, guide strategies for maintaining health, offer more accurate diagnosis, and guide treatment choices for a wide variety of conditions.”
- Genetic counseling can benefit patients considering genetic testing for certain conditions that affect the elderly, including cancer, cardiovascular disease and neurology.

Genetic Counselors Improve Patient Care

- As genetic testing becomes more complex, patients rely on the expertise of genetic counselors to guide them through the many aspects of the testing process.
- Genetic counselors are professionals with specialized education in genetics and counseling who provide support to patients and providers as part of the medical team.
- Key elements of genetic counseling include: offering support for informed consent and choice for patients; discussing the benefits, risks and limitations of genetic testing; and communicating results.
- Research demonstrates that genetic counselors save health care dollars when involved in the testing process, and can increase compliance with the recommended medical management plan.

Legislation is Needed to Enhance Medicare Beneficiary Access to Genetic Counselors

- For Medicare beneficiaries, genetic counselors must provide their services through arcane rules – “incident to” – that impede access to their services.
- Congress can improve access to genetic counselors by enacting a law enabling them to bill Medicare directly.
- Proposed legislation would improve enhance team-based care coordination for patients.

Changing Medicare Law Will Benefit Patients, Providers, and the Medicare Program

- For patients and providers, genetic counselors facilitate and improve education and communication, resulting in more informed patients and increasing patient and provider satisfaction.
- Genetic counselors are trained to help patients and caregivers “understand the scientific, emotional, and ethical factors surrounding the decision to have genetic testing,” and how to deal with test results, as noted by the NIH.
- There is evidence that genetic counselors reduce the frequency of inappropriate testing, delivering high quality service while lowering costs.

Proposed Legislation Enhances Access to Genetic Counselors for Medicare Beneficiaries

- Proposed legislation would increase access to genetic counselors and allow them to be reimbursed directly for services delivered to Medicare beneficiaries at 85% of physician payment levels.
- The legislation aligns with Medicare policy and legislation affecting beneficiary access to other allied health practitioners.

- The bill would enhance the ability of beneficiaries to see genetic counselors while ensuring other practitioners retain the right to provide these services if the activities are within their scope of practice.
- Enacting legislation is also likely to improve access and coverage through private health plans as they often follow Medicare policy.