

Robin Bennett Genetic Counselor, MS



GENETIC COUNSELOR **ROBIN BENNETT, M.S.**

Place of Employment:
University of Washington

Specialties:
Huntington disease, neurogenetics,
cancer genetics, genetic family history,
and ethical issues in genetic counseling
and genetic testing

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CAREERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT: GENETIC COUNSELOR

What do they do?

- Review a patient's medical and family history.
- Advise patients and their families about the benefits and consequences of genetic testing, and about the nature of genetic disorders.
- Offer counseling consistent with the patient's belief system.

What kind of training is involved?

Bachelor's degree and a 2-3 year Master's degree.

What is a typical salary for a Genetic Counselor?

Start at \$60,000/year (\$29/hour), and may make up to \$120,000/year (\$58/hour).

1. Where did you grow up?

I grew up on Mercer Island in Washington State and attended Mercer Island High School.

2. What do you do (i.e., what career or field are you in, what is the title of your position)?

I am a Senior Genetic Counselor and Co-Director of the Genetic Medicine Clinic at the University of Washington.

3. How did you choose your career? When did you first know this was the career you wanted?

I really hadn't cared too much for science until I had a wonderful biology teacher in tenth grade, Mr. Bill Tougaw. He taught science by telling stories and I was fascinated. He taught a course in Embryology and I was hooked. The field of genetic counseling was just starting. Once I learned about genetic counseling I knew it was the perfect fit because I could work in the fields of medicine and psychology but have more flexibility with my schedule to raise a family. I loved that the field was changing so rapidly that there were always new things to learn. This is still what I love most about being a genetic counselor almost 30 years later. I am honored to be among the first genetic counselors in the world and to have been a part of the growth of genetic counseling as a career.

4. Did your family support your decision to pursue your career?

Some days I feel that they still don't understand exactly what I do, but they were very supportive of my education and continue to support me in my career.

5. What is the highest level of education you have?

Currently, genetic counseling is a two year Master's Degree which is required from a program that is accredited by the American Board of Genetic Counseling. In the next five years there are likely to be Clinical Doctorate programs in genetic counseling which will probably be three years in duration. This change will allow genetic counselors more flexibility in seeing complex patients and reflects how complicated it has now become to provide genetic counseling because of the range of genetic tests now available.

6. What is the highest level of education reached by other members of your family?

My family is well-educated in unusual things! My father has a Master's in engineering and was a test pilot. My paternal grandfather was a family physician and my paternal grandmother was the nurse in his home office. My mother has a PhD in folklore. My sister has a PhD in mathematics and my brother has a Master's in plastic engineering.

7. What is the salary range for a person in your position?

It varies with experience but usually starts at about \$60,000 annually [\$29/hour] and some genetic counselors make at least \$120,000 annually [\$58/hour], plus benefits.

I suggest that you look at the professional salary survey for the National Society of Genetic Counselors for salary information at <http://www.nsgc.org>.

8. What do you like most about your job?

I learn so much from the people I counsel. I am inspired by the ways that they cope with such difficult problems that influence not only them but their whole family. I feel privileged to be a part in some small way with each of my patients and that hopefully I have helped them with some difficult decisions and with making choices that work for them within their belief systems. I love learning something new every day. I have never once had a boring day at work! I find genetic counselors to be very inquisitive and caring people. Usually I attend a genetics meeting once or twice a year for a few days; not only is it fun to see a new city but I love to be with my genetic counseling colleagues and learning from each other.

9. What do you like least about your job?

I am very sad when a patient dies, but even then I usually have learned something from the experience. All health care positions have too much paperwork and processes. I have trouble with administrators who seem more focused on their processes than the big picture of what helps patients and their families. Although genetic counselors are becoming more recognized on the health care team, it is still a relatively small profession. It can be hard to explain that you are not a generic counselor or a geriatric counselor.

10. What's an abbreviated day in the life of your job?

Most genetic counselors see patients two to three days a week, with four to eight patients daily. At a patient visit, we obtain family history information and draw a family pedigree. The pedigree is analyzed for patterns of inheritance and psychosocial clues to help the patient (for example, a patient may be particularly anxious about developing a disease like breast or colon cancer because he or she is now the age at which a relative also developed cancer). We would discuss genetic testing options, implications of

the disease, ethical issues, and if testing is done, make a plan for disclosing test results (either by a return visit or a telephone appointment). Usually a summary letter is sent that includes recommendations to see other relatives. The rest of the time is spent following up on test results, researching genetic diseases, and often attending lectures to keep up in the field. Many genetic counselors give talks in the community about their work and often participate in research studies.

These studies might involve disease registries, looking at psychological issues, performing patient surveys, etc. I have been fortunate in being able to write many book chapters and even my own book. I have been able to give talks in Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Europe. I also volunteer in many ways for my profession including serving on various boards related to my profession (such as for the National Society of Genetic Counselors, the American Board of Genetic Counseling, and the American Society of Human Genetics).

11. In one to two sentences, how would you say you use bioinformatics in your work? If you don't use bioinformatics directly in your work, how has bioinformatics impacted your career field?

Genetic counselors are totally dependent on databases that help interpret genetic testing results, risk models for disease prediction, and electronic reviews in the medical and psychological literature. All medical records are or will soon be electronic. There are unique issues around electronic medical records in genetics because they may interface with records of other relatives.

12. Do you have any recommendations for students who are interested in entering your field?

Currently, the number of genetic counseling programs is still limited and thus they are quite competitive. It is good to get some experience (volunteering is fine) making sure you like working with people, especially people who can have quite severe problems. Working or volunteering in a hospital or other medical setting is important (it doesn't have to be with people with genetic diseases). Ideas include Planned Parenthood, a crisis phone line, a hospice, patient escort, even volunteering to do paperwork in a genetic clinic office. Most genetic counselors are happy to speak to you about what they do. It is good to talk to genetic counselors who work with different populations, such as those in prenatal genetics (working with pregnant patients), cancer genetics, and pediatric genetics. The National Society of Genetic Counselors has excellent materials on their website about genetic counseling including salary/job surveys (<http://www.nsgc.org>). The American Board of Genetic Counseling has information about the schools accredited to provide genetic counseling and the competencies needed to be a genetic counselor (<http://www.abgc.net>).

13. What are your favorite hobbies?

Is eating chocolate a hobby? I play the harp and piano, sew, swim, do needlework, garden, walk my dog, and hang with my family and friends.

Resources:

In the **field of genetic counseling**, there are many different types of jobs available, depending upon what type of education and experience you have. For more information about different types of jobs in this field, including what you can do with different degrees (two year Associate's degree, four year Bachelor's degree,

graduate, or professional degrees), visit NWABR's Student Career Center at:
<http://www.nwabr.org/students/student-resource-center/career-center>.

The site also includes descriptions of and links to different types of degree programs, various career paths, resources on writing a resume and cover letter and evaluating online resources, and tips for successful job interviews.

All of the links below can also be accessed from NWABR's Student Career Center.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has a "Career Guide for Genetic Counselors" that details the **skills, knowledge, abilities, and tasks** required to be a genetic counselor, as well as information on **education and training**. For more information, visit:
<http://jobs.virginia.gov/careerguides/geneticcounselor.htm>.

Find information on careers in genetic counseling at the National Human Genome Research Institute, including information about **career outlook, working conditions, and salary**. Scroll through the career listings until you reach "Genetic Counselor" on page 2:
<http://www.genome.gov/GenomicCareers/careers.cfm>.

The US Bureau of Labor and Statistics offers a little information about genetic counselors:
<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos047.htm>.

Visit the National Society of Genetic Counselors for more information about genetic counseling and salaries:
<http://www.nsgc.org>.

Robin Bennett's homepage:
http://depts.washington.edu/medgen/faculty/Robin_Bennett.html.

Some of the Resources above may also be used to research other careers that may be of interest to you in the future, including the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, and the National Human Genome Research Institute.

Job Posting: Genetic Counselor Assistant Summer Internship

The genetic counseling clinic of Dr. Margaret Parry-Perkins is looking for motivated individuals interested in learning about genetic counseling and testing for genetic conditions. Our clinic works with patients who have a history of genetic disease in their family. We help patients understand the genetic testing process and what their results mean. Interns will work closely with counselors and laboratory technicians who analyze the patient samples. Prior lab experience is not necessary, but an understanding of molecular biology, including the role of DNA in encoding physical traits, is required. Applicants familiar with genetic testing and bioinformatics tools used to detect mutations are encouraged to apply. Additional computer skills, including Microsoft Office (Word®, Excel®, PowerPoint®), are preferred. Demonstrated ability to communicate well with others, listen to the needs of others, and explain complex topics in an easy-to-understand way is particularly valuable. If applicants are interested in genetic research but do not enjoy working with patients, we suggest applying for an internship in the lab of Dr. Leo Frankos in the Department of Applied Genetic Research. Applicants must be hard-working, responsible, good communicators, and able to work in a team

environment. Address all inquiries to Dr. Margaret Parry-Perkins, Seattle Research University, Genetic Counseling Clinic, Suite 300, Seattle, WA.