

**PROFESSIONAL ISSUES**

# Supervision for genetic counselors: The role of career-long supervision to develop resilient practitioners

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Email: [alison.mcewen@uts.edu.au](mailto:alison.mcewen@uts.edu.au)**Abstract**

Supervision is a professional activity that provides practitioners with opportunities to reflect on, integrate and learn from work experiences, build resilience, and develop and review their professional identity through reflective conversations with a supervisor and/or peers. Supervision involves a contractual agreement between a supervisor and supervisee (practitioner), that recognizes the accountability of the supervision process to professional and organizational standards and protocols. Incorporating supervision into practice for genetic counselors at all career stages provides a way to develop and strengthen competence and practice and support genetic counselor well-being and client safety. Evidence also suggests that active engagement with effective professional supervision reduces the likelihood of burnout in healthcare workers. Genetic counselors in some parts of the world, including Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, participate in career-long supervision as a requirement of certification and registration. As the genetic counseling profession expands and diversifies, individuals and professional societies are encouraged to embed the practice of supervision beyond graduate training, establishing a professional culture that values career-long facilitated reflection and learning. We propose the establishment of a global genetic counseling supervision community of practice for genetic counselors interested in developing supervision practices and sharing resources.

**KEYWORDS**

community of practice, genetic counseling, genetic counselors, life-long learning, supervision

Life-long learning is a core component of the professional requirements for genetic counselors. Internationally, genetic counselors are expected to give attention to continued learning in both their counseling practice and their knowledge of genetics, genomics, and related technology. Many countries include continuing professional development as a requirement for certification, registration, and licensure. Some jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom and Australasia, include participation in supervision as a continuing professional development activity. Thus, to maintain

their annual registration, these genetic counselors are required to engage in career-long supervision.

Supervision is a professional activity that is variously understood and practiced by different health and social service professionals (Davys et al., 2021). For some professions, supervision is hierarchical, required only for trainees and new graduates, and includes evaluation, monitoring, and education to promote safe and competent practice. Other professions embrace supervision as a process of reflection and learning for practitioners throughout their career,

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regardless of experience, role, or seniority (Bond & Holland, 2010; Davys & Beddoe, 2021). We have chosen to use the term “career-long” to refer to supervision for genetic counselors after completion of training. “Peer supervision” is one type of career-long supervision that is described by Kennedy (2002).

In some parts of the world, hierarchical supervision for genetic counselors is a traditional and common experience. Student genetic counselors are supervised as they progress through their genetic counseling training program. Once qualified, they are deemed to be independent and competent practitioners, and the supervision ends. Such supervision often involves direct observation of clinical encounters and is a form of transmissive learning.

The focus of our paper is supervision that practitioners engage in throughout their careers, regardless of seniority or experience. While direct observation or review of recorded clinical encounters may be part of career-long supervision, we are using the term to refer to reflective conversations about all aspects of our professional work. In comparison with the supervision of trainees, career-long supervision generates different types of learning and includes critical analysis and reflection.

Career-long supervision is led by the supervisee (practitioner) and is based on their work and experiences. Žorga (2002) provides a broad definition:

Supervision is a specific learning, developmental and supportive method of professional reflection and counseling, enabling professional workers (school counselors, teachers, childcare workers, psychologists, social workers, etc.) to acquire new professional and personal insights through their own experiences. It helps them to integrate practical experiences with theoretical knowledge and to reach their own solutions to the problems they meet at work, to face stress efficiently and to build up their professional identity. By this, supervision supports professional as well as personal learning and development of professional workers.

(p. 265)

These ideas are reflected by the Association of Genetic Nurses and Counselors (AGNC Supervision Working Group, 2007) Supervision Working Group in the United Kingdom who define genetic counseling supervision as:

... a formal and contractual arrangement, whereby genetic counselors meet with a suitably trained and experienced supervisor to engage in purposeful, guided reflection of their work... the aim of this process is to explore the interaction between the counselor and their client... enabling counselors to learn from experience, improve their practice and maintain competence. The overall intention is to enhance the quality and safety of client care and to

### What is known about this topic

Supervision is a professional activity that shapes a process of review, reflection, learning, critique, and replenishment for practitioners. Supervision involves a contractual agreement between supervisor and supervisee and is a requirement for genetic counselor certification and registration in some parts of the world.

### What this paper adds to the topic

Given evidence of the positive impact of supervision for healthcare and human services practitioners, career-long supervision for genetic counselors may be warranted. Establishing a global genetic counseling supervision community of practice involving individuals from a wide variety of countries, cultures, ethnicities, and communities could foster communication and an interchange of ideas regarding career-long supervision.

promote the ongoing professional development of the genetic counselor.

(p. 128)

The Human Genetics Society of Australasia (HGSA) released a Supervision Policy for Genetic Counselors in 2022 (Human Genetics Society of Australasia (HGSA), 2022a), using the following definition of supervision:

a forum for reflection and learning. ...an interactive dialogue between at least two people, one of whom is a supervisor. This dialogue shapes a process of review, reflection, critique and replenishment for professional practitioners. ...a professional activity in which practitioners are engaged throughout the duration of their careers regardless of experience or qualification. The participants are accountable to professional standards and defined competencies and to organisational policy and procedures.

(Davys & Beddoe, 2010: 21)

Purposeful, guided reflection and learning are central to these definitions, as is a focus on practitioner replenishment, support, resilience, and professional development. Supervision is a formal, structured process, and good supervision rests on an agreement or contract that is negotiated between the supervisor and supervisee (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). Supervision does not operate in a vacuum. Important boundaries are recognized to address the accountability of the supervision process to professional and organizational standards and protocols (Davys & Beddoe, 2021). Definitions of supervision draw predominantly on Western understandings of risk,

competence, reflection, and professional development, and each supervision relationship needs to reflect the different contexts and needs of the participants.

The benefits of supervision to supervisees have been variously reported. Watkins (2011), following a review of 30 years of research into psychotherapy supervision, found that supervision “enhanced self-awareness, enhanced treatment knowledge, skill acquisition and utilization, enhanced self-efficacy, and strengthening of the supervisee–patient relationship.” (p. 236) There is also evidence to support the view that active engagement with effective professional supervision reduces the likelihood of burnout in healthcare and human service workers (Adamson et al., 2012; Carpenter et al., 2013; Foster et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2021; Sewell et al., 2024; Wallbank, 2016).

The World Health Organization (2022) conceptualizes burnout as the result of ineffectively managed chronic workplace stress, which can contribute to workers leaving the workplace. Supported access to regular supervision contributes to resilience and a reduction in mental harm for healthcare and human services professionals. For example, interviews with 27 social workers from New Zealand found that supervision and collegial support are crucial to resilient practitioners (Beddoe et al., 2014) and a Scottish study found that supervision promoted resilience (Graham & Killick, 2019). Research examining supervision in both healthcare and human services provides substantial evidence of the positive impacts of this activity (Martin et al., 2021; Sewell et al., 2024). Consideration of career-long supervision for genetic counselors may also be warranted.

Bernhardt et al. (2009) found that genetic counselors are at risk of burnout, and a recent study in the US reported that burnout was prevalent among genetic counselors (Caleshu et al., 2022). The Professional Fulfillment Index (PFI) was included in the survey design of two studies of genetic counselors (Caleshu et al., 2022; Yeates, 2024). The PFI measures burnout and was validated using a group of physician participants (Trockel et al., 2018). Caleshu et al. (2022) recruited 397 genetic counselors through the National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC) in the United States. While they found 57.2% of participants scored in the burnout range on the PFI, the authors note the role that professional self-care activities play in reducing the likelihood of burnout; mindfulness training and professional development activities are listed among these activities. Supervision however is not discussed. A smaller Australasian study interviewing cardiac genetic counselors found lower levels of burnout, with 3/18 (17%) of participants scoring in the burnout range on the PFI. Participants in this study were engaged in regular individual, group, and/or peer supervision and reported valuing space for debriefing difficult cases, self-reflection, and learning (Yeates, 2024).

As noted earlier, the engagement of genetic counselors with career-long supervision varies globally. In Australasia, supervision has been integral to genetic counseling from its inception in 1990 (McEwen et al., 2013) and is required as part of annual renewal of registration (Human Genetics Society of Australasia (HGSA), 2022a). The Human Genetics Society of Australasia Code of Ethics embeds

supervision as a professional expectation, stating that genetic counselors must participate in regular supervision to maintain best practice (Human Genetics Society of Australasia (HGSA), 2022b). Similarly, supervision is a registration requirement for genetic counselors practicing in the United Kingdom and Ireland (AGNC Supervision Working Group, 2022). In some Asian countries, supervision is becoming informally embedded through the practice of genetic counselors, who have attended graduate training programs in Australasia and then returned to their home countries. In the United States, supervision is a requirement for students in training but is not described in the NSGC Code of Ethics, nor is it required for recertification by ABGC, although some genetic counselors continue to utilize supervision (National Society of Genetic Counselors (NSGC), 2017). There is variable access to, and participation in, supervision following graduation in European countries, where genetic counselors report limited access to supervision (Paneque et al., 2023).

The global expansion of the profession of genetic counselors provides opportunities to incorporate supervision through reflection of the way multiple cultural perspectives and values can strengthen professional identity (Ormond et al., 2024; Weil et al., 2024). As the profession grows, activities such as supervision contribute to a deepening understanding of the core unifying values, principles, and professional identity of genetic counselors (McEwen & Jacobs, 2021). Writing about peer supervision for genetic counselors in the United States, Kennedy (2002) commented that genetic counselors spend a lot of time keeping up to date with the genetic information that they are sharing with clients and that “...supervision offers an opportunity to address the scarcity of time during the workday for ongoing learning and support about the counseling aspects of their jobs” (pp. 381–2). Regular participation in supervision provides a forum for genetic counselors to reflect on and develop the counseling they provide and to receive support for all workplace-related matters. As Shohet (2011) notes, supervision encompasses “the idea of making protected time and space to reflect, so we can become proactive, rather than reactive, to the multiple demands that are made on us”. (p. 10).

Incorporating supervision into routine practice for genetic counselors at all career stages thus provides a vehicle for ongoing development competence and practice, as well as supporting the well-being of practitioners and the safety of clients. Given the substantial evidence that supervision contributes to practitioner well-being and resilience, lowers the frequency (or rate) of burnout, and improves practitioner retention reported in large reviews of both healthcare and human services professions (Martin et al., 2021; Sewell et al., 2024), it is appropriate and timely for a deep exploration of supervision in genetic counseling.

Creating a professional culture that embraces career-long supervision takes time and an ongoing commitment from professional societies to include supervision in Codes of Ethics and other core documentation. When supervision is included in guidelines or policies, genetic counselors have documentation to support their case for protected time to attend supervision.

Supervision has structure and has been described as a place where practitioners are helped to deepen their practice, build resilience, and grow as professionals. Within supervision, both supervisors and supervisees have roles and responsibilities, and navigation of this professional territory requires training (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Davys & Beddoe, 2021). Supervisees require information and preparation to become fully active partners in supervision (Morrison, 2001). They need to be clear about what supervision is, their role in supervision, and their rights. Research with social workers has shown that “training in supervision” was a characteristic of “a good” supervisee and contributed to good supervision (Davys, 2002). Similarly, good supervisors require commitment, good training, and participation in their own supervision (Morrison, 2001). Supervisors need, among other things, to have a framework or model for supervision, and skills to facilitate both the supervision process and supervisee learning. Both supervisors and supervisees require clarity about the boundaries of supervision, including awareness of the difference between supervision and other relationships and activities such as counseling, case review, management, education, performance review, mentoring, and friendship.

Good supervision rests on a negotiated agreement between supervisor and supervisee, which explores and clarifies the expectations, boundaries, and process of supervision. Diversity, including ethnicity, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and spiritual beliefs, can be discussed and an understanding and agreement can be reached about how these will be accommodated and respected in the supervision process. Practical aspects of supervision also require discussion and negotiation. The type of supervision (individual, peer, or facilitated group), frequency and timing, mode (online or in-person), confidentiality, and any fees should be agreed at the start of a supervisory relationship. Discussion about power dynamics between supervisee and supervisor is generally raised early in the relationship and revisited as part of the on-going review of supervision (Davys & Beddoe, 2021; Hair, 2014). Where possible, the supervisor should not be the supervisees' line manager. Attendance at supervision is the responsibility of the supervisee, and the supervisor does not have a role in assessing suitability for on-going registration. The supervision agreement or contract is a living document that needs to be revisited and reviewed regularly. A contract template is provided in Box 1.

Internationally, many social service and healthcare professions require regular, career-long supervision, which requires access to supervisor and supervisee training (Watkins, 2014). The following demonstrates how many of the issues with training genetic counseling supervisors have been addressed in Australasia. Australasian genetic counselors access supervisor training facilitated by social workers and counselors through workplaces, private providers, and universities. In 2022 the Human Genetics Society of Australasia introduced a requirement that supervisors had a minimum of 10 hours of training and began offering annual profession-specific training for genetic counselor supervisors (Human Genetics Society of Australasia (HGSA), 2022a). Training is offered online (4 fortnightly

sessions and a small group reflection) or in-person at the annual scientific meeting (4 hours in-person and a small group reflection online). Human Genetics Society of Australasia training includes an overview of the theoretical basis for supervision, a supervision model (based on adult learning theory) to give structure to sessions, and the purpose and content of supervision contracts. Training focuses on genetic counselor situations through scenarios for discussion and role play. Participants record a supervision session and participate in a reflective conversation. Over 100 genetic counselors have completed the training. Supervision theory and practice are included among topics in the annual Australasian Society of Genetic Counselors webinar series.

Supervision is a forum for learning, accomplished through reflection on practitioner work and practice (AGNC Supervision Working Group, 2007; Human Genetics Society of Australasia (HGSA), 2022a). Regular reflective conversations with a supervisor provide opportunities for professional growth and ongoing development, including a focus on professional identity as genetic counselors. Supervisees, at all stages of their careers, reflect on themselves in their work with clients, research participants, colleagues, students, managers, and those they manage. Facilitated reflection with a supervisor creates opportunities to examine our beliefs and ideas from different perspectives, ensuring learning and growth continue (Carroll, 2009). Supervisee goals for supervision change over time and may include professional growth, specific skill development to further strengthen competence, and skills to enhance professional relationships.

In a fast-evolving field, protecting time to pause and reflect is crucial. This is perhaps particularly important as the activity of genetic counseling is integrated into mainstream practice by healthcare professionals using genetic testing as part of treatment and management planning. Supervision provides an ideal place to reflect on and articulate how genetic counselors practice genetic counseling and the psychotherapeutic value that is central to genetic counseling provided by a genetic counselor (Biesecker, 2020).

As authors, we acknowledge and reflect on the many ways our positionality interacts with our experiences of supervision. We experience supervision as a Pakeha woman from Aotearoa New Zealand, who has worked as a clinical genetic counselor and now works as an academic genetic counselor; as a Pakeha woman who has long involvement with teaching, researching, and practicing supervision in academic, community, and private settings; and as a white man in his 80s originally trained as a research scientist, who is increasingly convinced of the necessity of expanding his understanding of alternative ways of experiencing the world. Active, career-long participation in supervision continues to create opportunities for deep, guided reflection on many aspects of our professional identities. As the genetic counseling profession expands and diversifies there is a strong argument for career-long supervision, and we urge both individuals and professional societies to consider embedding the practice of supervision beyond graduate training so as to establish a professional culture that values life-long facilitated reflection and supervision.

**BOX 1 Example supervision contract.**

Between NAME (supervisor) and NAME (supervisee). NAME (supervisor) is a member/fellow of NAME OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY and abides by their Code of Ethics.

NAME (supervisee) is a member/fellow of NAME OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY and abides by their Code of Ethics.

**What supervision is and why it is important**

Consider adding a statement or definition suited to the region.

**Meeting details:**

Frequency, mode.

**The supervisee can expect that the supervisor will:**

- Facilitate provision of a non-judgemental, safe space for reflective practice.
- Listen.
- Behave respectfully.
- Refrain from judgment.
- Model reflective behavior.
- Attend supervision in a quiet, private space where you will not be overheard
- Maintain confidentiality as agreed when the contract is made (see below)
- Participate in their own individual supervision.
- Keep a brief written summary of each meeting.

**The supervisor expects that the supervisee will:**

- Come to supervision prepared.
- Share the responsibility for each meeting.
- Listen and respond respectfully.
- Refrain from judgment.
- Maintain confidentiality as agreed when the contract is made (see below).
- Attend supervision in a quiet, private space where you will not be overheard.
- Prioritize attendance each fortnight/month and notify the supervisor if they are unable to attend.
- Make a note of their personal goals for supervision.

**Confidentiality**

All material presented and discussed in supervision will remain confidential to the supervision session, *except*:

- a. The supervisor may take any material to their own supervision.
- b. Should the supervisor be concerned about issues of safety for either the client, the supervisee, or the organization, they may break the confidentiality. In this situation, they will inform the supervisee and consult their own supervisor prior to breaking the confidence.

**Conditions**

- Supervision will be uninterrupted.
- An agenda will be set at the beginning of each session and may include a review of any work/tasks undertaken since the last session.
- The supervisee will be primarily responsible for bringing the material for each session, but the supervisor may from time to time bring issues or topics to attention.
- The focus of supervision will be on professional issues and will acknowledge personal issues only where they relate to or impact on the work being done.
- *As the supervisor is external to the supervisee's organization, the supervisor will not hold clinical responsibility for the supervisee's practice. (DELETE IF THIS DOES NOT APPLY)*
- Should an issue of clinical practice be raised in supervision which is not able to be addressed in external supervision the supervisee will, in the first instance, consult and discuss the issue with their line manager within their organization.

**BOX 1 (Continued)****Conflict resolution**

Should conflict or disagreement arise in the supervision relationship the following steps will take place:

- (i) The two parties will in the first instance endeavor to discuss and resolve the issue between themselves.
- (ii) If the above fails an outside mediator, who is acceptable to both parties, will be called in to help resolve the situation.

**Review**

- Supervision sessions and the contract will be reviewed and confirmed within 3 months of being initially signed.
- Thereafter supervision will be reviewed annually, or at any time as requested by either party.

While we acknowledge that supervision is unlikely to become a requirement for genetic counselor registration in all countries, we encourage individuals and groups of genetic counselors to explore the practice of regular, career-long supervision as we navigate changing times. We propose the establishment of a global genetic counseling supervision community of practice for genetic counselors interested in developing supervision practices. A community of practice is a forum for professionals to network through regular interaction. Group members share common interests and develop knowledge and skills through participation. A genetic counseling supervision community of practice could bring like-minded people together to foster communication, exchange ideas regarding supervision globally and consider opportunities for research. Regular online meetings (for example quarterly) would allow members to identify commonalities and differences in the potential role of supervision in different communities, consider the role of supervision in the goals of both professional growth and ensuring continued practice competence, collate and share resources and develop training for supervisees and supervisors. Members could also collaborate to develop a corpus of genetic counseling supervision research.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Alison McEwen, Allyson Davys, and Jon Weil contributed substantially to the conception of the work, drafted and revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

Alison McEwen, Allyson Davys, and Jon Weil declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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