Texas Physicians’ Awareness and Utilization of Genetic Services

Callie Jenevein, BA (Advisor: Jennifer Hoskovec, MS, CGC)

The number of disorders for which genetic testing is available has increased nearly 500% in the past 15 years. Access to the majority of genetic tests and services hinge on physicians’ ability to identify patients at risk for genetic disease and provide appropriate testing and counseling or refer to genetic specialists. Recent research demonstrates the need for referrals to genetics specialists by showing that many physicians lack skills required to perform appropriate genetic services, such as making proper risk assessments, providing genetic counseling, ordering genetic testing and interpreting results. However, little research exists on physicians’ awareness and utilization of genetic services. In this study, an electronic survey evaluating practicing physicians’ awareness of, utilization of, and perceived barriers to genetic services in Texas was distributed via state physician organizations. Of the 157 participants, approximately half reported they were moderately or very aware of genetic testing and services in their area. Very few reported awareness of telemedicine services. Over two-thirds reported never or rarely referring to genetic counselors or other genetic specialists, despite 75% reporting they had noticed an increased impact of genetics on their field and 61% reporting they had discussed genetics more in their day-to-day practice in the last 5-10 years. Only 20% reported genetics was very integral to their specialty. Over three-fourths of all participants indicated interest in learning more about genetics, genetic testing and genetic services. Among the most frequently chosen barriers to genetic counselors were awareness-related barriers such as not knowing how to refer to a genetic counselor. Responses to many items varied significantly by medical specialty. The results identify a need to increase awareness of genetic services and referral logistics. Specific findings can help direct outreach efforts to educate clinicians, such as developing clinically meaningful, specialty-specific educational objectives.

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