

UW Health: Celebrates Genetic Counselor Awareness Day

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MADISON, Wis. – Genetic counselors make a tremendous impact on a patients' lives but can often go unnoticed.

Today is national Genetic Counselor Awareness Day, and UW Health and the UW School of Medicine and Public Health want the public to know the vital role these medical professionals play in patients' care.

Genetic disorders are often complex and can be scary for patients following a screening or diagnosis, but genetic counselors are there to make sure patients are supported, guided and cared for along the way, according to Peter Levonian, director, genetic counselor services, UW Health.

"Genetic counselors care for people in some of the most vulnerable, confusing moments in their lives, making them feel as comfortable as possible throughout their journey," he said.

Genetic counselors participate in health care in a variety of ways when there is a genetic link to the condition or illness. Inheritable risk factors can be associated with numerous types of diseases, from cardiology to cancer and many more. Counselors collaborate with a patient's full care team to provide information, guidance and emotional support and to help patients understand their family history, evaluate genetic testing options and make informed choices based on test results.

UW Health employs 24 genetic counselors in eight clinical areas, according to Levonian.

Since 1976, UW–Madison has been home to the Master of Genetic Counselor Studies Program at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health. The program

accepts eight students each year for the two-year graduate degree program, which involves courses in genomics and counseling and clinical rotations at many UW Health clinics.

Training professionals in the principles of counseling is critical to being able to conduct the very important and often emotional conversations counselors have with patients, while delivering very technical and complex information, according to Casey Reiser, director, Master of Genetic Counselor Studies Training Program.

“Our graduate students work extremely hard so they can be there for their patients,” she said. “We are so proud of our graduates, but also of all genetic counselors everywhere for their tireless efforts to keep patients informed and prepared for their diagnosis and care.”

Levonian and Reiser are available for interviews today and a recorded interview with Levonian is available as well.