

CASE STUDY

# How St. Joseph Hospital Designed a Walk-In Genetic Counseling Clinic

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Providing timely access to keep pace with rising demand

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# Overview

## The challenge

Rapidly expanding eligibility criteria for genetic testing drives increased demand for genetic counseling services. Surging demand strains genetic counselors' capacity and leads to long patient waiting lists. Cancer programs that resist innovative solutions to limited capacity risk hindering their genetic counseling program's growth and reaching fewer patients who would benefit from the service.

## The organization

St. Joseph Hospital, located in Orange, CA, is part of Providence St. Joseph Health, a large non-profit health system with 51 hospitals across 7 states. In December 2019, St. Joseph Hospital launched a walk-in genetic counseling clinic, and plan to implement the program to other hospitals in their system.

## The approach

To keep up with an influx in volumes, genetic counselors at St. Joseph Hospital designed a streamlined alternative genetic testing pathway for a subset of patients. The program offers walk-in genetic counseling sessions, which are more efficient than conventional appointments, with a genetic counseling assistant.

## The result

St. Joseph Hospital's genetic counselors can accommodate a 2-4x increase in patient volumes while reducing wait times. St. Joseph Hospital decreased the time between diagnosis and treatment start for breast cancer patients by embedding walk-in genetic counseling into biopsy visits.

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# 2-4x

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Increase in number of patients seen by genetic counselors

# Approach

## How St. Joseph Hospital designed a walk-in genetic counseling clinic

St. Joseph Hospital supplements their standard genetic counseling process with an alternative walk-in model. The remainder of this publication details the core components of their walk-in genetic counseling clinic.

### The three components

Genetic counselors at St. Joseph Hospital designed an expedited genetic counseling system comprised of three core components:

**01** Carefully defined target population  
with fewer genetic risk factors

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**02** Streamlined counseling materials

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**03** Appropriately delegated roles  
for genetic counseling assistants

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# 01 Carefully defined target population with fewer genetic risk factors

Patients who are eligible for genetic testing fall on a spectrum of risk and needs. The term, “high-risk,” can describe a range of hereditary and non-hereditary cancer risk levels. While some patients with strong genetic risk factors require intensive genetic counseling, others who have relatively low genetic risk may still benefit from genetic testing. For example, genetic testing is the standard of care for patients with some forms of cancer but no pertinent family history. These patient populations need timely access to genetic counseling to avoid delays in care.

St. Joseph Hospital recognized that one way to meet patient need while combating genetic counselor capacity shortages was by foregoing a “one-size-fits-all” approach, and instead stratifying patients by risk level. They developed an expedited process for certain subsets of patients who would not find as much value in the conventional, time-intensive genetic counseling session, and in turn accommodated more patients in their schedules.

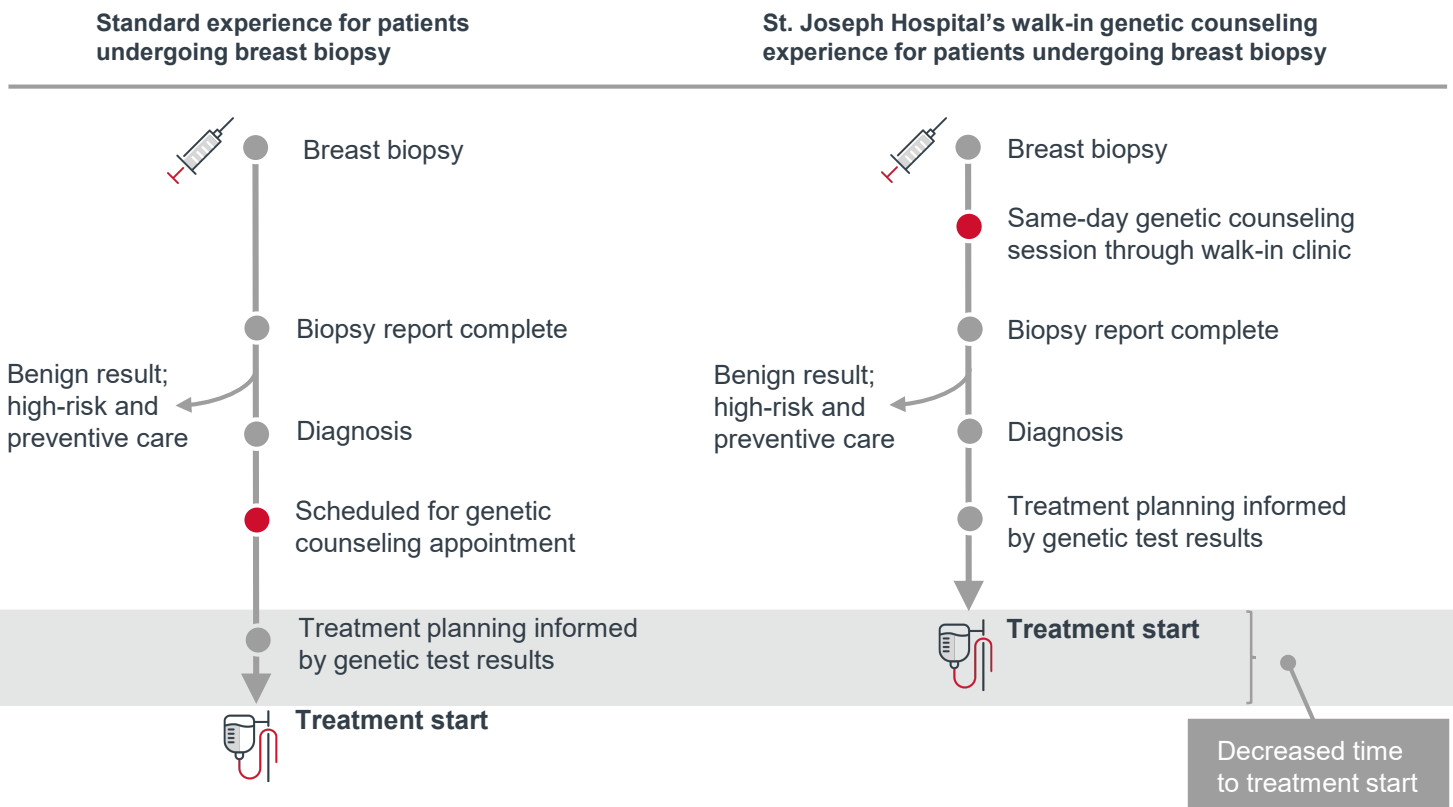
Their team of genetic counselors focused on carefully identifying the right patients for the accelerated pathway to ensure that they did not neglect the needs of higher-risk patients.

The first subset of patients eligible for the fast-tracked genetic counseling clinic are patients diagnosed with cancer. These patients are frequently older, may not have pertinent family histories, and would prefer to avoid additional appointments. While their treatment may be informed by genetic testing, the patient does not necessarily need a full genetic consultation. These patients have access to the walk-in clinic and often arrive after a scheduled visit with their oncologist.

CAREFULLY DEFINED TARGET POPULATION WITH FEWER GENETIC RISK FACTORS

St. Joseph Hospital also offers patients access to same-day genetics services at the time of breast biopsy. In recent years, some organizations have expanded recommendations that genetic testing be made available for all patients diagnosed with breast cancer. By getting patients into the walk-in genetic counseling clinic at this early stage, St. Joseph Hospital is able to jump-start the treatment planning process without delays for genetic testing if the patient is diagnosed with cancer.

Many patients appreciate having the option to receive immediate genetic testing and “cover their bases” when it comes to determining their cancer risk, even if the results of the biopsy are benign. In instances where the biopsy indicates that the breast mass is cancerous, St. Joseph Hospital’s patients have already completed genetic testing, which can inform treatment choices, thus decreasing the time from diagnosis to treatment start.



Source: Helwick, C. "American Society of Breast Surgeons Recommends Genetic Testing for Newly Diagnosed Patients with Breast Cancer." ASCO Post. (2019). <https://www.ascopost.com/issues/march-25-2019/asbs-recommends-genetic-testing-for-newly-diagnosed-patients-with-breast-cancer/>; Sun, L. et al., "A Cost-effectiveness Analysis of Multigene Testing for All Patients with Breast Cancer," JAMA Oncol. (2019). 5, 12: 1718-1730. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaoncology/fullarticle/2752373>; St. Joseph Hospital, Orange, CA. Oncology Roundtable interviews and analysis.

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## CAREFULLY DEFINED TARGET POPULATION WITH FEWER GENETIC RISK FACTORS

After establishing the walk-in genetic counseling clinic for cancer patients and patients undergoing breast biopsy, St. Joseph Hospital expanded the system to eligible patients identified at the time of their screening mammogram and endoscopy, as well as some unaffected patients in the general population who are concerned about their cancer risk.

Fast-tracked genetic counseling is not appropriate for all patients, and many benefit from more extensive counseling and relationship-building with the genetic counselor. St. Joseph Hospital's genetic counselors continually assess individualized patient risk factors to determine the suitability of the streamlined sessions compared to standard appointments. It's important to carefully consider the needs of your patient population when considering the implementation of St. Joseph Hospital's alternative model.

## 02 Streamlined counseling materials

To increase the efficiency of their walk-in visits, St. Joseph Hospital genetic counselors use standardized materials that help to cut down on preparation and appointment length.

After the patient is roomed in the walk-in clinic, they view a standardized educational video about hereditary cancer risk and the implications of genetic testing. The patient then completes a short questionnaire that quickly assesses their risk of developing cancer and testing eligibility. This questionnaire is an abbreviated version of the more comprehensive risk assessment that St. Joseph Hospital administers to patients prior to a conventional genetic counseling appointment, which provides additional detail for a formal genetic cancer risk assessment.

A genetic counselor reviews and oversees the case and coordinates testing. If the patient is eligible and consents to genetic testing, the staff collects the saliva sample, and prepares it to send to the lab.

### Key elements of walk-in genetic counseling session



Video streamlines patient education



Questionnaire collects only applicable data



Saliva specimens speed up sample collection process

In the event that the patient does not have coverage through their insurer, the maximum out of pocket fee is capped at \$250 to ensure the genetic testing is affordable for patients.



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## STREAMLINED COUNSELING MATERIALS

The standardization of these materials in the walk-in model allows the visit to take place in a shorter window of time, without sacrificing genetic counselor oversight, the content of the patient education, or personalized follow-up.

In comparison, a traditional genetic counseling appointment requires a significant investment of time per patient for preparation and a more intensive conversation about the implications of hereditary risk for the patient's family. While many patients certainly benefit from this more intensive counseling process, there are some who prefer the convenient access to the service.

# 03 Appropriately delegated roles for genetic counseling assistants

St. Joseph Hospital employs genetic counseling assistants (GCAs) to increase genetic counselors' capacity to see more patients. The program rigorously trains their GCAs and carefully defines their role to enable them to best support the team's genetic counselors.

The walk-in clinic is primarily staffed by GCAs who meet with the patients to administer the risk assessment, play the educational video, and to collect the saliva sample. Throughout, the GCAs remain closely supervised by a genetic counselor. The genetic counselor is able to supervise multiple GCAs at once and ensure that all testing is coordinated appropriately and correctly documented.

The genetic counselor delivers the results to the patient, reviews pertinent personal and family history, recommends follow-up, and provides formal post-test genetic counseling, as needed. Each patient accounts for only 15 minutes of the genetic counselor's time prior to administering the test in the expedited pathway because of the support from the GCA. Conversely, in a conventional appointment, the genetic counselor would spend about 2 hours preparing for the appointment, meeting with the patient, coordinating testing, and completing consultation notes.

Because the walk-in genetic counseling session is more efficient than a conventional appointment, the GCAs are able meet with patients, take care of prep work, and lead education, thus allowing the genetic counselors to work at top-of-license, supporting genetic excellence throughout the cancer center.

## GCAs allow genetic counselors to perform higher-level duties

Genetic counseling assistants' common roles and responsibilities:


- Document medical and family history
- Write routine patient communication
- Complete informed consent, insurance authorization, and other forms
- Input data in genetic counseling registry
- Obtain prior medical records and document visit in EHR
- Collect samples and prepare for submission to lab
- Coordinate clinic workflow
- Coordinate cascade testing for family members

# Results

St. Joseph Hospital reduced the amount of time dedicated to pre-test preparation and genetic counseling for each patient from 2 hours for a conventional appointment to only 10-15 minutes in the walk-in clinic—an 88% reduction in time. When considering a combination of regular appointments and time dedicated to the walk-in clinic, each genetic counselor is able to see 2-4 times the number of patients.

The walk-in clinic enables genetic counselors to keep next-available standard appointment times at the “sweet spot,” of 3 weeks, while keeping next-day appointment times open for patients who have urgent needs, like those just diagnosed with advanced or metastatic disease and those identified with high genetic risk.

For patients who received same-day genetic services at the time of their breast biopsy, the results of the genetic test are available for deeper discussion after the biopsy report comes back. The genetic counselor provides recommendations for personalized risk management for patients with benign biopsy results, while treatment planning is jump-started for patients diagnosed with breast cancer.

St. Joseph Hospital has seen a preliminary decrease in the time from diagnosis to treatment start since the program began. Because of the program’s success, in May 2020, it was expanded to Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo, CA, which is also part of Providence St. Joseph Health. There are plans to extend the walk-in genetic counseling clinic model to other Providence sites in the region. 

## 88%

Reduction in genetic counselor’s time spent per patient in walk-in model

### The “sweet spot” in scheduling



Urgent next-day appointments available for patients diagnosed with **advanced disease or high genetic risk**



Standard appointments for average risk patients **scheduled 3 weeks out**





Decrease in time between cancer **diagnosis and treatment start**


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# Oncology Roundtable

## Project Director

Mallory Kirby

[KirbyM@advisory.com](mailto:KirbyM@advisory.com)

202-266-6699

## Research Team

Emily Venner

## Program Leadership

Emily Heuser

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655 New York Avenue NW, Washington DC 20001  
202-266-5600 | [advisory.com](https://advisory.com)