

The Value of Volunteers in End of Life Care (EOL)

A Canadian Experience

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1. Aim

This paper examines the significant positive benefits that can be derived from volunteers' contributions particularly in end of life care. We will report on three key themes found in the literature:

- ✓ Roles performed by volunteers in palliative care/ hospice
- ✓ Training and organizational issues
- ✓ Outcomes, including the effect that volunteers have on palliative and end of life care as well as the experience of volunteering itself.

This presentation will also highlight successful and innovative programs that utilize volunteers in end of life care in Windsor Ontario Canada.

2. Data & Methods

For this purpose, a brief review of the literature on EOL care volunteers was conducted. The search includes search terms that would isolate articles pertaining to volunteers in healthcare and palliative care. This paper also incorporated qualitative research involving focus groups with volunteers and patients, and in-depth interviews with healthcare providers and leadership.

3. Results

Volunteers were engaged in a wide variety of roles in many health and social care settings. Duties ranged from practical activities such as home visits, transportation, meal preparation, clerical duties, and fundraising to directly participating in personal or nursing care. In palliative care, they often provided bereavement counseling, emotional support to patients and families, and chaired support groups or trained other volunteers. Acts of care and compassion included helping to turn patients in bed, assisting them to eat meals, providing spiritual care, and vigil sitting with the sick and dying were also common. Volunteers were often perceived to have more time and opportunity than paid health care providers to spend with the sick or dying and their families. Often they provided emotional and social bereavement support which was seen as a major contribution by both patient/family and healthcare providers.

4. Conclusion

From these findings it is clear that volunteer efforts not only positively impact patient care by improving the quality of life of people/patients and their families, but also have positive benefits for both the volunteer and the organization. Volunteers also offer financial stability to organizations by performing roles that would be done by paid staff. The literature suggests that volunteer support work is made especially valuable because paid care providers rarely have time to focus on bereavement with patients and their families. Canadian organizations responsible for palliative and EOL care realize substantial benefits from incorporating volunteers into their programs. Hospitals benefit most when they systematically map the ways in which volunteers add value in each department, pro-actively recruit people to fill the roles identified, and put appropriate support and training in place. Volunteers are increasingly seen as being part of the care team and provide a trusted source of support to professionals. Volunteering also has the potential to deliver a number of benefits to health and organisations including creating services that are more responsive to local needs (Paylor 2011); filling gaps in provision (Hussein 2011; Paylor 2011); and facilitating improvements in professional-patient relationships and interactions (Paylor 2011; Jones 2004).