

## Volunteering<sup>[JB1]</sup> in Palliative Care

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The number of people seeking to volunteer in palliative care is staggering. I regularly hear stories of applicants being told there is quite a wait, often many months before they can commence a prescribed training course.

So what is it that draws people to commit their time and themselves to a field of care that brings them face to face with what the majority of the population dreads, namely death?

The reasons vary, but it is not uncommon to find that those aspiring to be a volunteer have been touched by death and wish to give something back to their community. At another level their experience has affected them in a way that draws them to be with people who have a life---limiting illness. It is as if their fear of death has been altered by their experience and they now seek to enter further into what is commonly called the mystery of death. They wish to contribute, but at the same time they also wish to learn, and it is this combination of contributing and learning that makes volunteering in palliative care so attractive and fulfilling.

Overseas studies suggest there are numerous reasons why people seek to volunteer in palliative care. The four most common are: altruism, civic responsibility, personal gain and leisure (I hardly consider volunteering in palliative care 'leisure'). In another study the main motivation was "to help ease the pain of those living with a life---threatening illness."

The way a person can contribute as a palliative care volunteer depends on the knowledge and talents of the individual, the needs of the community in which they live and the services/facilities that are currently available (or unavailable) within that community. Contrary to popular belief a volunteer service is not contingent on there being a hospice in which to train and volunteer. Many of the early volunteer services within Australia and the UK were established to meet the needs of a community where there was no hospice. The formal link between a volunteer service and a hospice is a relatively recent development and while there is much volunteers can do within such a facility the greatest need for volunteers will always be outside the hospice walls.

According to Palliative Care Victoria, the main role of volunteers is to offer friendship and practical support.

*"There are varied roles available to you if you wish to become a palliative care volunteer. These can involve hospital or home based patient and carer support, providing pro bono expert advice, administrative support and assistance with fundraising.*

*The majority of palliative care volunteers work in the home or inpatient palliative care setting. They can offer a wide range of services: being with someone while their carer goes out, shopping, providing companionship, taking someone for a drive or to an appointment, writing letters, minding children, writing down someone's life story, playing music or singing, answering the phone, making bereavement phone calls, helping organise a memorial service, helping with life enhancement projects, providing beauty treatments, gentle massage, reflexology, aromatherapy and other suitable complementary therapies; the list goes on ..."*

While each of these services is important the greatest contribution a volunteer can make when visiting a patient or carer is not related to what they do or say but to how well they listen. It's about the quality of presence a person brings into the space, their ability to be in the moment and to hear what is being said and what is not being said (these qualities are equally important for any personal or professional relationship). This is how one doctor defines the valuable art of listening:

*We listen not only with our ears, but with our eyes, mind, heart and imagination, as well. We listen to what is going on within ourselves, as well as to what is taking place in the person we are hearing. We listen to the words of the other, but we also listen to the messages buried in the words. We listen to the voice, the appearance, and the body language of the other... We simply try to absorb everything the speaker is saying verbally and nonverbally without adding, subtracting, or amending.*

Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern-day palliative care movement said, "It's not what you do, but the manner in which you do it that counts." It's about one's ability to relate to the person, to be compassionate rather than sympathetic and to be responsive to the individual's needs rather than one's own fears. Contrary to popular belief a volunteer is never there as a helper but as a companion and a sounding board.

Volunteering in palliative care is not easy work (thus my disquiet about leisure being a motivating factor). It's as much about discovering who you are, what fears and beliefs you harbour about death and dying and how these can influence your capacity to be fully present to the person you are visiting. Working with those who are dying will teach you as much about yourself as it will about death and dying.

A training course is therefore essential for any person wishing to become a palliative care volunteer; even for those who will not have contact with the dying and their carers. It introduces aspirants to the roles and responsibilities of a volunteer, prepares them emotionally for some of the difficult and more confronting situations, teaches them skills and offers opportunities for debriefing and to learn from others. It will also help them to discover what aspect(s) of volunteering they are attracted to, remembering this often changes with time and experience. Not everyone is suited to the pastoral care role. Many are more comfortable with rolling up their sleeves and being hands-on. No task is more important than another and those who work behind the scene contribute as much to the service as those who have direct patient/carer contact

The challenges in getting the Southern Highlands Community Hospice built are frustrating, but this should not deter volunteers from continuing their present contributions in the areas of administration, publicity, the Hospice shops and fund raising. The current limbo-like state presents those in the Southern Highlands with the opportunity to establish a volunteer training programme, become more informed about the needs of their community and to offer practical and pastoral support for those at home, in hospital or in an aged care facility that are struggling, suffering or simply lonely.

The benefits of time and the value of preparation is exemplified in the following quote, "If I had a day to chop down a tree, I would spend the first six hours sharpening my axe" (original source unknown). Now is the time to sharpen your axe.