

The many roles of British hospice volunteers

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In late May/early June 2011, my wife Jane and I were fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to visit three adult residential hospices in Devon, England. The hospices we visited were Hospiscare in Exeter, St Luke's Hospice in Plymouth, and North Devon Hospice in Barnstaple. At each hospice, we met with the volunteer services manager, talked informally with groups of volunteers to learn more about their roles, and toured the facility and grounds. I was absolutely amazed at everything these three hospices in the southwest of England had to offer (free of charge) for local people and their families who are living with a terminal illness.

I was also struck by the sheer number of volunteers working for these hospices - over 1,000 at Hospiscare, over 1,100 at St. Luke's Hospice, and over 500 at North Devon Hospice. It should be noted that not all of these volunteers actually work at the hospice; many volunteers work in the community (e.g., visiting patients in their homes, working in one of the hospices' charity shops, fundraising, collecting money for the hospices' lottery). Another thing that surprised us was the number of different ways that volunteers can get involved in hospice. For example, the Hospiscare volunteering application form (available on its website) lists 20 different volunteer roles. The St Luke's Hospice website identifies 19 different volunteer roles and the North Devon Hospice website lists 16 different volunteer positions. The goal of this article is to briefly describe some of the different ways in which volunteers help out at the three hospices we visited.

Fundraising, charity shop, and lottery volunteers

All three hospices are registered charities and, as such, rely on large teams of fundraising volunteers to "get money in the bank" to help keep the hospice going (government funding only covers a portion - less than 30 percent - of these hospices' annual running costs). Hospiscare, for example, needs to raise nearly 4 million pounds (just over 6 million Canadian dollars) a year to continue doing the work that they do (i.e., providing care and support to terminally ill patients and their families). This money comes from donations, gifts in wills, fundraising, Hospiscare's charity shops (which sell donated clothing, books, CDs, DVDs, toys, bric-a-brac, furniture, etc.) and the weekly Hospiscare Lottery (a very successful fundraising endeavour). We were particularly impressed with the number and variety of fundraising events each hospice holds throughout the year. Hospiscare has, for example, garden visits (i.e., people in the community open their gardens up to the public and charge admission or ask for a donation to visit), fun runs, sponsored swims, golf tournaments, cycling challenges, live music, and a midnight walk for women; these events (and others) are organized and coordinated by fundraising volunteers. Other volunteers help by working in one of the 17 Hospiscare charity shops (e.g., creating window displays, putting items on shelves, working the cash register, looking after customers), collecting donations for Hospiscare ("shaking cans") on the street, staffing stalls at community events, and collecting lottery

money.

Needing to raise at least 3.5 million pounds a year (just under 5 and half million Canadian dollars), fundraising volunteers at St Luke's Hospice play a similar role; planning and carrying out different events, including open gardens, dinner parties, sponsored walks, cycling events, and a midnight walk for women. Midnight walks for women are a very popular fundraising event for hospices all over the United Kingdom; last year, St Luke's Hospice midnight walk for women attracted more than 2,000 women - who paid a registration fee and got sponsors - and raised a staggering 250,000 pounds (just under 400,000 Canadian dollars). With 34 charity shops, volunteers also help out by sorting, pricing, and selling donated items; still others help by canvassing for the St Luke's Hospice weekly lottery.

Volunteers at North Devon Hospice help out with fundraising events such as a ladies-only nightwalk, fun runs, abseiling, floating bye (a wicker and bamboo raft containing flowers and memorial messages that is floated out to sea), a sports and classic car run, sponsored walks, as well as by collecting lottery subscriptions or helping out in one of their 12 charity shops. It costs the North Devon Hospice over 3 million pounds a year (over 4 million Canadian dollars) to provide free care and support to individuals and their families who are living with a terminal illness. At all three hospices, fundraising volunteers are available to help anybody in the community who would like to organize an event to help raise funds for their local hospice. A number of the hospices' fundraising volunteers are involved in the administrative side of things, for example, working in the office, sending out mailings, issuing receipts, and so on.

Drivers

Each hospice has a group of volunteers that help with transportation needs; volunteers who drive patients to appointments/outings/shopping, pick up and drop off patients to the day hospice, or deliver and collect items that have been donated to the hospices' charity shops. Drivers who take patients to and from the day hospice often have meaningful conversations with them during the journeys. Often, the drivers are the first contact with patients coming into the hospice for the very first time. One driver told us that, "On that first day, they [the patients] are usually very worried and nervous about what is going to happen", but he found that he has "never taken somebody home from their first day of hospice who doesn't say, 'I can't wait until next week.'" Some drivers use their personal vehicles; others drive special vans or buses equipped for patients in wheel chairs. Drivers who use their own vehicles get a standard mileage payment to cover their traveling expenses.

Day hospice (day care) volunteers

All three hospices provide a day hospice or day care service, that is, a place where patients can come and enjoy the company of others who are "in the same boat" and the support of friendly volunteers. Patients typically come once a week from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm; if needed, transportation is provided. While attending the day hospice, patients have access to nursing support/care and can enjoy a meal (lunch), a wide range of relaxing complementary therapies (e.g., massage, aromatherapy), arts and crafts (e.g., drawing, painting, pottery), hair and hand care, and time in the hospice's peaceful and beautiful gardens, while giving family caregivers a much-needed break. The role of

the day hospice (or day care) volunteer typically includes meeting and greeting patients as they arrive at the hospice, serving them tea, coffee, biscuits and sandwiches, and providing friendly chats and a listening ear. As one of the day hospice volunteers put it, "It's a massive distraction for their [the patients'] day and they really look forward to it." A number of volunteers talked about how much they enjoy talking with the patients, listening to stories of what they did in their lives, and building up relationships with them. By all accounts, there is a lot of laughter, reminiscing, and sometimes singing in day hospice.

Complementary therapy volunteers

To aid relaxation and bring relief from stress, anxiety and tension, all three hospices provide a variety of complementary therapies for their day hospice patients, in-patients, patients at home, and the patients' caregivers. Many of these therapists are qualified volunteers who offer their time and skills free of charge. The North Devon Hospice, for example, has four complementary therapy rooms and offers aromatherapy, reflexology, Reiki, acupuncture, and Indian head massage. One of the driver volunteers we met commented on how most of the patients he brings in for aromatherapy "fall asleep in the car before they have even gotten back home." Aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, and Indian head massage are also offered at Hospiscare, while St Luke's Hospice offers a range of complementary and alternative therapies including aromatherapy, homeopathy, massage, reflexology, Reiki, and Shiatsu. One of the day hospice volunteers we met was a former hospice patient herself ("and very lucky to get through it all"); she talked about how nice it was to have a body massage and healing (when she was a patient).

Gardening volunteers

The gardens at all three hospices were beautiful, affording patients and their visitors an opportunity to go for a walk and be out in the fresh air for a little while. At North Devon Hospice, for example, patients can stroll (or go by wheelchair or motorized buggy) along paths through grounds that include fruit trees, a rose garden, a kitchen garden (planted with carrots, onions, lettuce, potatoes, etc.), a retreat garden, a physic garden (planted with medicinal or healing herbs and plants), two ponds, and a gazebo. St Luke's Hospice has a beautiful "Remembrance Garden" overlooking the bay (Plymouth Sound) where patients and their visitors can watch boats coming and going. The garden has picnic tables, a gazebo, and a pond with memorial pebbles (smooth pebbles engraved with the names of patients who have died). Hospiscare is located in the same grounds as the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital; it also has beautiful and tranquil gardens in which patients and visitors can walk. All three hospices rely on gardening volunteers - individuals with a passion for gardening - to help with such tasks as cutting the grass, planting, weeding, pruning, and digging.

Befrienders (or home support) volunteers

The befriender's role is closest to the role of the direct patient/family care volunteer in the community-based hospice programs in New Brunswick (where we live). In addition to the nurse specialists who visit patients in their own homes, volunteers, referred to as befrienders (or home support volunteers), are also available to provide social, emotional, and practical support to patients and their families for a few hours

each week at the patient's home. Befrienders can be involved in multiple ways from providing friendship and support to assisting with practical tasks, such as shopping, letter writing, driving the patient to medical appointments or to the shops, walking dogs, gardening, helping around the house with jobs, sitting with patients so that caregivers can have some respite, and so on. One befriender volunteer we met described the role as being a "professional friend."

In-patient (or bedded unit) volunteers

Volunteers are also on hand in the in-patient (or "bedded") units at each of the hospices we visited, along with doctors, nurses, etc. Some patients will live out their remaining days in the unit; others will come into the unit for a few days to have their pain and symptoms brought under control, after which they will return home. The role of the bedded patient (or in-patient) volunteers is similar to the role of hospice palliative care volunteers in New Brunswick's hospital-based programs (i.e., volunteers who visit patients in the hospital's palliative care unit). The in-patient unit at St Luke's Hospice consists of 20 beds, four beds per room. The North Devon Hospice offers 7 single bedded rooms, each with its own private bathroom and veranda overlooking the beautiful gardens below (the patient's bed can be wheeled out onto the glass-fronted veranda). Hospiscare has a 12-bed in-patient unit and, like the other two hospices, offers around-the-clock patient care. Visitors are welcome on the unit at any time. The role of bedded unit volunteers is primarily to support the nursing staff by, for example, helping at meal times (e.g., delivering meals and drinks, clearing away trays); they also sit and talk with patients, look after relatives, keep the unit tidy, run errands, and so on. Volunteers in the in-patient units do not provide any hands on patient care.

Chaplaincy volunteers

Chaplaincy volunteers assist the hospice chaplain in providing spiritual support for patients and families. For example, volunteers will go around and visit with patients in the bedded unit and at the day hospice. Much of their time is spent listening and they rarely speak about religion (i.e., introduce it) unless patients and families want to talk about it. Each hospice we visited has a chapel available to all as a place for prayer and quiet.

Reception and servery volunteers

Reception volunteers are on hand to greet and welcome patients and visitors as they arrive at the hospice, answer phone calls, and provide administrative support. Servery volunteers help in the kitchen, dining room, and coffee bar, serving food and drinks to patients and their visitors; servery volunteers are also available to help with food and beverages for patients on the bedded unit.

Bereavement volunteers

Some volunteers work mainly with the families of the bereaved and will do so for as long as they are needed. For some bereaved family members, bereavement care may be just one phone call; for others it may be one-to-one meetings, drop-in sessions for a cup of tea and a chat with others who are bereaved (e.g., peer support), home visits, and so on.

The description of volunteer roles above is not an exhaustive one; for example, there are also maintenance volunteers, library volunteers, volunteers who help in the

office (e.g., do statistics), kitchen and gift shop, trustees, tour guides, and others – and many of the volunteers we spoke to are doing multiple roles. The volunteer services managers and hospice volunteers we met were wonderful people. It is always such a privilege to spend time with such friendly and inspirational individuals, and the hospices themselves were warm and uplifting places with all kinds of amenities (e.g., lounges, dining rooms, art rooms, cafes, complementary therapy rooms). It was truly a rewarding and memorable experience. Coming from Atlantic Canada and being more familiar with the kinds of support provided by hospice palliative care volunteers who go into patients' homes or visit patients in the hospital, we were particularly impressed by the wide range of roles open to volunteers in the three Devon hospices we visited. Many of the hospice palliative care volunteer programs in New Brunswick are non-profit community-based organizations, providing free services funded through donations and fundraising. During our visit to the hospices (for whom fundraising never stops), we heard about lots of unique and fun ways to raise funds and we strongly encourage volunteer coordinators (or managers) to contact these (and other) British hospices for fundraising ideas (St Luke's Hospice has a "Fundraising Pack" that can be downloaded on their website). These hospices really are the experts when it comes to fundraising.

Finally, our visits to the three hospices in Devon served to confirm our belief in the need for residential hospices (and the specialized services they offer) for people who cannot (or choose not) to remain at home to die, like Bobby's Hope House in Saint John, New Brunswick - Atlantic Canada's first residential hospice, which opened last year. The British volunteers we met spoke of the great joy they got out of volunteering for hospice. We also got a lot of joy out of visiting these hospices and meeting some of the incredible people who work in them.