

Who's in your hospice palliative care volunteer program ... and who's missing?

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For those of you who are either volunteers or volunteer coordinators (managers), take a good look around the room during your next volunteer meeting. Who's in your volunteer program? What do they look like? How would you describe them? I'm guessing that a typical hospice palliative care volunteer in your program is most likely going to be a married white female who is middle-aged or older. In fact, that is the "profile" that seems to emerge time and time again in Canadian, American and British studies of hospice palliative care volunteers. The preponderance of females (who usually make up 80 to 85% of the volunteers in a given program) may be due, in part, to gender socialization. As Jeanette Auger notes in her book *Social Perspective on Death and Dying*, throughout time and across settings, females are "recognized as the primary knowers of how to care for, nurture and support the dying." Without intending to sound sexist, middle-aged and older females who do not work outside the home may also have more time to do volunteer work (especially after their children have grown up). Who's missing? ... young people, males of all ages, and members of visible minorities.

[Note: I'm referring to direct patient/family care volunteers here.]

Who would benefit from having younger volunteers? ... younger patients, for one, and some older patients might also benefit from the "youthful outlook" of a young adult volunteer. To shed some light on this topic, we asked 105 male and female undergraduate students (with an average of 19 years) to read a brief description about the kinds of things that hospice palliative care volunteers usually do to support and look after dying persons and their families [Claxton-Oldfield, S., Tomes, J., Brennan, M., Fawcett, C., & Claxton-Oldfield, J. (2005). Palliative care volunteerism among college students in Canada. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Medicine*®, 22 (2), 111-118, Study 1]. After reading the description, we asked them if this sounded like something they might be interested in trying. Only 37% of the students responded "Yes"; not surprisingly, significantly more females (46%) than males (25%) expressed an interest in becoming a hospice palliative care volunteer. We also asked them to provide a written explanation for their answer. The most common reason given for wanting to volunteer was "to be of help to others"; this was mentioned by 82% of the students who expressed an interest in becoming a volunteer. Among those who were not interested, the most common reason for not wanting to volunteer was because "it would be too emotionally demanding or draining", which was mentioned by 38% of the students - some of the students felt that they would get too attached to the terminally ill person and it would hurt too much when the person died. Other reasons given for not wanting to volunteer included "don't have the skills" and "don't have the time." It should be noted that the majority (76%) of the students did not know what hospice palliative care is before taking part in this study.

For many young people, the idea of being with a dying person is not something they feel comfortable with (e.g., "It must be so depressing!"), yet we know from actual volunteers that supporting dying people and their families can be an immensely rewarding experience. I should also mention that, in Study 2, we found that there was a great interest among undergraduate students (females and males) in volunteering in a classroom, at a food bank and in a nursing home. So, it's not that young people are not interested in any kind of volunteer activity, they're just not that interested in volunteering to become involved in the care of the dying. These findings suggest that, if programs want to attract more younger people to hospice palliative care volunteer work, volunteer coordinators might consider asking their more experienced volunteers to go into the schools and talk about the philosophy of hospice palliative care, the rewards of volunteering (e.g., making a real difference in other people's lives) and how being challenged emotionally is not a negative thing (i.e., it's an opportunity for personal growth). It is also important to let young people know that they will receive training before being asked to spend time with a dying person and that, as a volunteer, they will be asked to commit to work a couple of hours per week (i.e., it

won't take up too much of their spare time). This strategy might encourage more younger volunteers to come on board.

From the study mentioned above, it is clear that young males in particular are not attracted to hospice palliative care volunteer work, but what about middle-aged and older males? Where are they? Why is the shortage of male volunteers a concern? Males have different emotional and social needs than females and some terminally ill males may feel more comfortable with a male volunteer. Using a similar methodology to the one we employed with young people, we asked 68 males (with an average age of 54 years) to read a description of what volunteers do and then indicate if they were interested in becoming a hospice palliative care volunteer [Claxton-Oldfield, S., Guigne, S., & Claxton-Oldfield, J. (2009). How to attract more males to community-based hospice palliative care volunteer programs. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Medicine*®, 26 (6), 439-448, Study 1]. The percentage of older males who said "Yes" was very similar to the percentage of younger males who said "Yes" in our earlier study (22% and 25%, respectively). The males' reasons for their lack of interest in becoming a hospice palliative care volunteer included "not having enough time" and "it would be too difficult emotionally." However, unlike the younger students in our previous study, 81% of the older males knew what hospice palliative care is, likely an artifact of their age. An interesting finding in this study was that, among the older males who were not interested in hospice palliative care as a volunteer activity, more than one-third of them responded "Yes" to a number of other volunteer activities, for example, "driving", "organizing or supervising events", "fundraising", "sitting on a committee or board", "collecting, serving, or delivering food" - activities that could conceivably be the responsibility of a volunteer in a community-based program. In Study 2, we asked 59 older males (with an average age of 61) to select from a list of tasks – things that hospice palliative care volunteers might do - the ones that they would be willing to perform if they were a volunteer. More than 80% of the males expressed a willingness to listen to the dying person's memories and life stories, provide friendship and companionship, play cards, talk and share hobbies and interests with the dying person, as well as run errands and provide drives. These findings suggest that when it comes to recruiting male hospice palliative care volunteers, volunteer coordinators might consider using a "targeted ad" such as:

"Do you like helping others? Would you be willing to drive someone to a doctor's or hospital appointment or run errands for them? Are you a good listener? Would you be willing to sit with someone and talk, provide friendship and companionship, play cards or Scrabble, share interests or hobbies, or go for a walk? If you answered yes to these questions, then maybe volunteering in hospice palliative care is for you!"

Creating a volunteer position description that specifically includes the kinds of tasks that the majority of males say they are willing to do might be an effective way of attracting more males to the world of hospice palliative care; this requires testing. Future research should also investigate why, for example, so few members of visible minorities volunteer in hospice palliative care settings.