

Palliative care volunteers in Europe:

Qualitative analysis of volunteer activities and experiences

EAPC Task Force on Volunteering in HPC

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Background

Volunteers are an essential and integral part of hospice and palliative care (HPC) in many countries. It is often others, rather than volunteers, who report their activities and experiences. Led by the EAPC Task Force in Volunteering, this project aimed to give volunteers a voice and to invite their personal stories of involvement in HPC in their own words.

Aims

The aims of the project were to:

- To understand:
- the experiences of volunteers in HPC
- why they work in HPC
- what volunteering in this field means to them

Method

Task Force members in eight countries were asked to invite five volunteers to write about their volunteering activities and experiences in their own language.

Two prompt questions were given to volunteers: "What do you do as a volunteer?" "What does it mean to you?" Stories were translated into English and a qualitative framework used for analysis.

Response

- Total of 36 volunteer stories received
- 8 Countries: Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, UK.
- Majority (n=34) of volunteers offered practical, emotional, social and spiritual support to adult patients and families.

Settings

Volunteers involved in diverse adult HPC settings:

- including patient's homes
- hospices
- hospitals
- care homes

Also
2 volunteers involved in community children's palliative care

Meaning of being a volunteer

Volunteers gained significant meaning from their work in a number of ways:

- Giving comfort to others in moments that count- work is emotionally heavy
- Brings new perspectives
- Feeling honoured and privileged
- Personal development
- Gives meaning to their own life
- Growing through making connections

Volunteer quotes

There is "value in personal growth from volunteering"

"I am a richer, grateful person

"I'm thankful that I am allowed to be there"

"And we laugh too-to be honest we laugh a lot"

It "leaves marks on my soul"

Conclusion

The narratives gave an insight into personal stories of volunteers in different countries and highlighted many similarities in shared experiences and values. Understanding these perspectives can help HPC organisations to improve how volunteer skills may best be utilised and supported.