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The Use of Student Volunteers in the Hospice Setting and the
Benefits and Disadvantages Experienced

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the frequency of use of student volunteers in the hospice setting across the country. Hospice agencies were asked to answer a questionnaire regarding their use of student volunteers and the disadvantages or benefits that they have experienced. One hundred percent of the participants indicated that they use students as volunteers in their agency. The student's youthful outlook, fresh perspective, and enthusiasm were the most frequently cited benefits. The main disadvantage of using students centered around commitment issues, such as the unavailability of students during school breaks. The results of this study suggest that the student volunteer is a valuable asset to the hospice team.

The Use of Student Volunteers in the Hospice Setting and the Benefits and Disadvantages Experienced

The comfort and care that volunteers offer to terminally ill patients and their families has long been an extremely important component of the hospice movement. Volunteers work in numerous settings ranging from direct patient care to administrative tasks and are invaluable to the hospice program. In fact, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, “A hospice must document and maintain a volunteer staff sufficient to provide administrative or direct patient care in an amount that, at a minimum, equals 5 percent of the total patient care hours of all paid hospice employees and contract staff” (Title 42, 2000). With this regulation in effect, volunteers have become an important and necessary addition to the hospice team.

There have been numerous studies that have examined the importance of hospice volunteers and the roles performed by hospice volunteers. Yet, there are few studies known to the researcher that have investigated the frequency of use of high school or college student volunteers in this type of setting. Claxton-Oldfield, Tomes, Brennan, Fawcett, & Claxton Oldfield (2005) examined palliative care volunteerism among college students in Canada. It was determined that 62.9 percent of the participants indicated that they were not interested in becoming a palliative care volunteer. Furthermore, Newsome & Dickinson (2000) studied college age students’ awareness of and involvement in hospice. Although 77 percent of respondents had heard of hospice, “only 2 (both women) of the 122 students had volunteer experience with hospice” (Newsome & Dickinson, 2000). This research may suggest that college students are not interested in becoming hospice or palliative care volunteers.

The current researcher was interested in determining the frequency of use of student volunteers in the hospice setting across the country. In addition, the researcher sought to uncover both the benefits and disadvantages to using student volunteers. Based on the lack of knowledge about hospice care among students at the researcher's current institution and the previous research in the area, it was hypothesized that the use of students to fill volunteer roles would be a rare occurrence in hospice agencies throughout the country. One would think that the majority of college students would not be comfortable dealing with the dying and their families and would, consequently, fail to be interested in volunteering with a hospice agency.

It was believed that the benefits of using students would far outweigh any of the disadvantages that arose when using student volunteers, with the main benefits focusing on the student's energy and youthful outlook. It was hypothesized that the main disadvantage would focus on commitment issues. Often college students have very busy schedules, which include school, work, and extracurricular activities, leaving little time for volunteerism. Therefore, it was believed that students would be volunteering their time as a class requirement, such as a fieldwork internship or a community service need. A significant disadvantage would arise when the student's requirement was met, and the student failed to continue volunteering for the agency. Although this undoubtedly affects the hospice agency, it has a profound influence on the terminally ill patient and their families who are left without a volunteer.

Method

Participants

Potential participants were randomly selected from the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization list of hospice providers. Thirty participants were sent an introductory letter describing the purpose and nature of the study and asking permission to send a questionnaire. Furthermore, 10 additional participants were recruited at the Association for Death Education and Counseling conference in Tampa, Florida in March 2006. Questionnaires were distributed to 27 hospice agencies throughout the country between March and April 2006 that agreed to participate in the study. Sixteen hospice agencies returned the questionnaire. The age, gender, and ethnicity of the volunteer coordinator were not a significant factor in the current research.

Materials

The research instrument was a questionnaire. The initial question asked participants if students had ever worked at their hospice agency. Based on the participant's response, four additional open-ended questions were posed. The main purpose of these questions was to discover the disadvantages and benefits that the hospice agency has experienced when using students as volunteers or anticipate experiencing when using student volunteers. The questionnaire should have taken about 10 minutes to complete. The researcher's contact information was included to answer any questions that the participants had.

Procedure

After obtaining permission, the researcher mailed participants a package that included an introductory letter, a questionnaire, an informed consent, and a self addressed, stamped

envelope. The introductory letter was more comprehensive than the initial letter and explained the background and purpose of the study. The letter also included instructions. Written informed consent was obtained from each of the participants.

Results

The main results of this study were in extreme opposition to the researcher's hypothesis. Although the frequency of use of student volunteers was hypothesized to be low in hospices across the country, the exact opposite was determined. In fact, 100% of the participants responded that students were used as volunteers in their hospice agency.

When asked if their agency had placed any limits on the student's hospice involvement, there were mixed responses. Three of the 16 participants responded with a simple "no," while five of the 16 agencies had policies that required students to be of a certain age to volunteer. This age requirement was either 16 or 18, with two respondents adding that the age requirement was flexible depending on the student's maturity level. Four of the 16 agencies limited the student's involvement by mandating that students must be supervised at all times. Depending on the agency, the supervision came from either a hospice staff member or an adult volunteer. It was not made clear at what age a person is considered an adult volunteer. There were two other limitations that hospice agencies cited. One agency required student volunteers to stay with the organization for a predetermined length of time. Another agency restricted the student's length of visits when directly dealing with patients.

When asked to describe any disadvantages or problems that had been experienced when using students, there was a wide array of answers. However, most of the responses, 10 out of 16, centered around commitment issues. Problems included a lack of commitment, a

lack of availability, and irresponsibility to commitment. One of the main disadvantages occurred when students were finished with their class or community service requirement and discontinued volunteering. Similar to this, problems arise when students spend their winter and summer breaks away from the hospice facility, nursing home, or house in which their patient lives. Three of the participants cited the busy schedules of student volunteers to be a disadvantage in maintaining consistent volunteer schedules and following through with the training programs required. There were a few other responses concerning disadvantages or problems that the agency has faced when using students. One response indicated that students use more time and energy of the staff to be prepared or debriefed. Furthermore, it took students longer to become independent volunteers.

Participant's responses again varied when asked to describe the advantages of using students as volunteers. Students increase the pool of potential volunteers and the necessitated volunteer hours mandated by law increase when students become volunteers. When students volunteer with hospice to fulfill a class requirement, the hospice benefits from the student's continued service in trying to meet their requirement. This is especially true when students are committed to fulfill a large number of volunteer hours. Furthermore, students usually help with tasks that the staff does not enjoy doing. Agencies also cited the inconsistent schedules of students to be of benefit when patients' needs are inconsistent throughout the week. Nine of the participants cited the student's enthusiasm, passion, excitement, and the new ideas brought to the agency to be a benefit. Furthermore, students bring a "fresh perspective," a "youthful outlook," and "a breath of fresh air" to the hospice agency. Student also seem to keep staff "on their toes" with all of their questions.

Discussion

The data presented above is contrary to the original hypothesis of the researcher. It was hypothesized that the use of student volunteers in the hospice setting would be uncommon, when in fact, 100% of the participants in this study had students working for their organization. Although the current result may be contradicting the previous research in the area that determined college students were not interested in becoming hospice or palliative care volunteers, the conclusion that students are interested in hospice volunteering may not be accurate because it is unknown how many hospice agencies do not use students. The frequency with which students were determined to be used has strong implications for hospice agencies throughout the country. If hospices previously omitted students in their recruitment strategies, they should undoubtedly present volunteer opportunities to students, thus increasing the amount of potential volunteers.

As the results suggested, the main disadvantage to using student volunteers focused on commitment issues. The researcher will regard these commitment issues as the student's ethical dilemma. The student's ethical dilemma arises when the student is volunteering with the hospice agency for a class requirement. When the required volunteer hours are met, the student faces a decision whether to continue with the agency or cease volunteering. Problems arise when students cease volunteering, leaving the hospice agency in an awkward position to explain to the terminally ill patient why their volunteer will not be coming back. The dying patient's family may also be at a disadvantage if the volunteer allowed them a respite from caring for the patient. The ethical dilemma also arises during the student's winter or summer break if the student decides to spend the break away from the geographical area of the college.

However, the benefits of using student volunteers are too important to disregard because of the student's ethical dilemma. Among the benefits include the fresh outlook, enthusiasm, passion, and excitement that students bring to the hospice agency. Furthermore, students often keep hospice staff on their toes when they ask questions. Hospice agencies also benefit from the use of student volunteers from a business perspective. If students are used, the pool of potential volunteers increases, thus enabling the agency to follow the mandated law concerning hospice volunteers. Obviously, the agency benefits from the energy and youthfulness of student volunteers in different ways.

However, when students volunteer in the hospice setting there most importantly are benefits to the terminally ill patients and their families. According to the participant's responses, terminally ill patients are often pleasantly surprised to see such a young face volunteering for a hospice organization. Students bring a youthful outlook and energy that may seem contagious to the patient's family. Furthermore, the relationship that young volunteers and elderly patients form may be very different than the relationships formed by older adults and older volunteers. According to one participant, "Sometimes students relate to the patient as they would an elderly family member, such as a grandparent." When this happens, the volunteer often shows "genuine interest and affection" for the terminally ill patient. Furthermore, students tend to view illness with a fresh perspective and readily laugh, smile, and brighten the days of the patient while visiting.

Efforts should be made to decrease the potential disadvantages that arise when using student volunteers. It is unfortunate that some hospice agencies pass up the benefits that students offer because of the potential disadvantages that may also occur. Hospice agencies,

students, and patients would benefit if future research examined the ways in which the student's ethical dilemma could be reduced. Perhaps students and hospices could arrange an agreement during the initial training sessions mandating the student volunteer for a certain length of time. Perhaps if students are informed about the consequences that significantly affect the dying patient when they discontinue volunteering, they will continue to volunteer after their requirement has been met. Clearly, future research in this area would be beneficial.

It is important to recognize the small sample size of this research. Because these hospice agencies may not be representative of hospice agencies in general, it may be difficult to generalize from these results. Although this study illustrates the frequency with which students are used as volunteers in the hospice setting, future research should include a larger sample size of hospice agencies.

Although the response rate in the current study was 59.3%, perhaps the 40.7% of nonrespondents were hesitant to participate in the research because of the belief that their experiences would be of little or no help in determining the benefits and disadvantages of using student volunteers. However, the anticipated disadvantages that hospices may have should not be overlooked because these disadvantages may be the primary reason why students may not be sought or accepted as volunteers. Future research should assure hospice agencies that their experienced or anticipated reactions to using student volunteers are significant in determining whether students are used as volunteers throughout the country.

References

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