



The Asklepiian tradition?

Value of End of Life Volunteering according to Volunteers Themselves (a letter project)

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Introduction

In the Netherlands each year more than 10.000 volunteers provide a contribution to palliative care at hospices, at home situations and in specialized palliative care units. The value of these contributions is questioned from policy and professional care perspectives. Professionals claim that volunteers should 'learn skills' and should not 'just do something'.

Literature describes a lack of clarity in roles, tasks and identity of Hospice and Palliative Care (HPC) volunteers. In cooperation with VPTZ* (Volunteers Palliative Terminal Care) we

initiated several studies to explore the value of volunteering contributions to palliative care. Subquestions address value for clients, nearest relations, regular care and society.

This study focuses on the question: **what does HPC volunteering bring to the volunteers themselves?**

A call on the website of VPTZ resulted in more than 130 volunteers' letters. We analysed 100 of these. Of the research group 13 volunteers were male, the average age was 62 years, the

average experience with this type of volunteering was 6 years.

Data was analysed by a) a qualitative discourse analysis to identify themes in impact of the volunteering (on volunteers) and subsequently analysed by b) frame of reference (type of words) used, to characterize the end of life voluntary practice.

* VPTZ = a branch organisation in The Netherlands with over 200 members such as hospices.

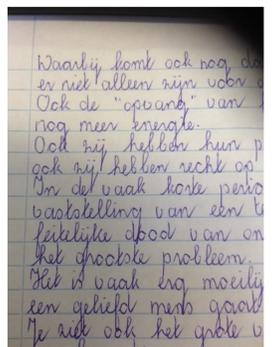
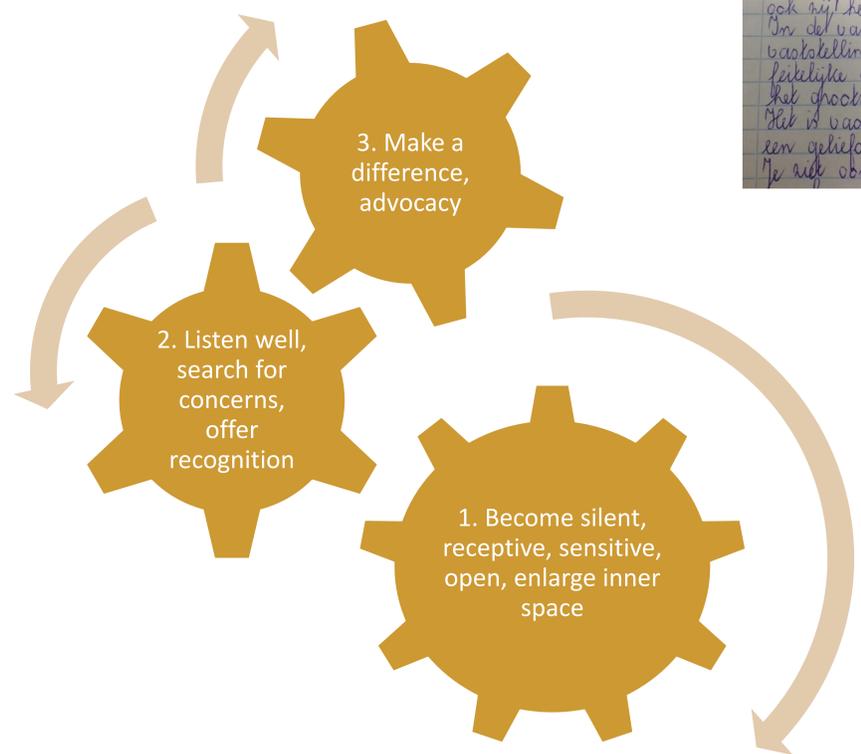
Results

Themes found were a) motives to start volunteering (e.g. positive or negative experiences with the death of a relative; spare time, being intrigued by death), b) positive emotions (satisfaction, thankfulness) as a result of their contributions, c) make a difference, d) personal growth and e) close connection with other volunteers.

Furthermore, we found that volunteers' satisfaction relates to a) making a difference, b) sharing experiences with other volunteers, and c) the environment in which volunteers function. HPV volunteers report personal growth as a result of being existentially moved by the work which again improved their relational qualities.

Analysis of the type of words (frame of reference) that volunteers use focus on 'being there' as a central concept in these practices. One volunteer described 'being there' as: 'serve, leave your ego at home, and be silent about your experiences.' Descriptions of volunteering as a practice of 'being there' come together in figure 1 and include: inner preparation, becoming silent, inner space, being receptive, listening, finding out what matters, make a difference, act in tune with the other, acknowledge and advocacy.

Clues for reflection: questions for volunteers were developed on the themes 'quality of attention', sensitivity, and 'being where they are'.



The practice of 'being there'

Theoretical reflection

Out of an overview of different theoretical lenses on HCP volunteers' contributions, theories of presencing and presence appropriately describe the art of 'being there'. We explored 19 of these theories that seem to hold value for professionals as well.

Another valuable theoretical perspective found was the so-called Asklepiian tradition (providing concentrated attention that enables inner peace) as contrasted to a tradition based on Hippocrates (reducing symptoms), both described by Randall & Downie (2010).

Literature

- Randall, F., Downie, R.S. (2010) The Philosophy of Palliative Care. Critique and reconstruction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goossensen, A., Sakkers M. (2014) 'Daar doe ik het voor', ervaringen van vrijwilligers in de palliatieve zorg. Uitgave VPTZ Nederland.

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