What does a palliative care volunteer do?

Palliative Care Volunteers offer compassionate, 'neutral' support to those living with a terminal illness. There are varied roles available to you if you wish to become a palliative care volunteer. These can involve hospital or home based patient and carer support, administrative support or assistance with fundraising.

Volunteer activities complement and enhance the care being provided by the professional staff both in the Hospital and in the Community. Voluntary work has always been integral to the provision of Palliative. In the Home, the role of the volunteer can include providing companionship and support to both the patient and their carers; respite for the carers while they attend to other matters or take a break and; help with simple tasks such as shopping or visits to the clinic for treatment, taking someone for a drive, writing letters, minding children, writing someone’s life story, singing, answering the phone, making bereavement phone calls, helping organise a memorial service, helping with life enhancement projects, providing beauty treatments, gentle massage, reflexology, aromatherapy and other suitable complementary therapies; the list goes on ... The richness of the Volunteer Programs is largely due to the variety of backgrounds and skills the volunteers bring.

These include hairdressers, beauticians, car drivers, musicians, artists, competency with massage and relaxation techniques, clerical to name just a few, but most of all… a generous and loving compassionate heart and a lot of common sense.

Who can become a palliative care volunteer?

Anyone can volunteer - but palliative care is not for everyone!

Palliative Care volunteers are generally over the age of 18. In this work, life experiences and life skills are enormously beneficial. However, there are no formal qualifications or previous experience necessary - only the desire to be of service to palliative care patients and their families/carers and the willingness to learn from those they serve.

Palliative Care volunteering offers an opportunity for people to be involved with others at one of the most significant times in their lives. Those wishing to become volunteers will usually have had some life experience that has touched them and made them more aware of the circumstances that face those living with a terminal illness. The desire to help others, learn more about grief and loss, and come to terms with their own mortality, are all legitimate and worthwhile reasons to volunteer for palliative care service. Volunteering in palliative care offers the intellectual and emotional stimulation of having to deal with ‘the big questions’, such as the meaning of life and death, and gives an opportunity to reflect on one’s own values and priorities.

Volunteers tend to assess their own suitability after reading available information and attending introductory interviews and a mandatory Education Program. Volunteer Managers say that emotional strength grows as volunteers ‘walk the talk’ and support each other along the way. The volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds however they all have in common generosity of spirit and a strong commitment. They bring their own interests and compassion to help in any way needed.

Volunteers need to be patient, flexible, non judgmental, understanding and accepting of other people’s beliefs and values. They need to be able to work within a team, and provide support & encouragement to their peers. They also need to understand and accept the philosophy of palliative care. Perhaps one of the most important criteria is that volunteers should be happy to BE with people and not feel they have to fix things. It’s about ‘presence’.

Working in palliative care is one of the most rewarding volunteer choices anyone can make. Not only...
does it make a huge difference to the person who is dying and their family, but also to the volunteer’s own life. Volunteers learn to cherish each day, listen deeply and value life as a precious gift.

**How much time will I have to commit?**

 Volunteer commitment varies - usually depending upon how much time volunteers can give and the organisations requirements.

 Some organisations ask people to sign up for a given time, perhaps a year, because they have made a considerable investment in education, training and resources. Some services will also limit a volunteer’s time to, say, four hours per week and one patient.

 Volunteers often move in and out of their volunteer role. Managers know that taking time out for study, holidays, work or family commitments is important; and that encouraging volunteers to pursue other interests while still remaining part of the team, avoids burnout.

**What training and preparation is required?**

 Introductory training is required. The length of this free course and the topics covered vary between services. Most courses are up to 30 hours in length and include sessions on such topics as:

 - Introduction to palliative care
 - The palliative care volunteer’s role
 - Diversity
 - Spirituality
 - Communication skills
 - Responding to loss and grief
 - Basic Introduction to illnesses and their symptoms
 - Death and dying
 - Self care of the volunteer

 Participants do not have to sit exams but do have to attend the whole course.

 The organisation will invite applicants to join once they have completed their introductory training course and taken part in a final interview.

 Volunteers will be asked to continue to enhance their skills through experiential on the job learning and on-going training And support are provided by the Manager of Volunteer Services.

 How do I become a palliative care volunteer?

 You can contact your local palliative care service to express interest or seek more information. Once you have selected and contacted the organisation of your choice, you will most likely be invited to attend an interview. Organisations conduct interviews so people can find out more about the volunteer job and the organisation can find the suitability and right volunteer for the job.

 Thank you to Palliative Care Victoria and Calvary Volunteer Service for the source material for this fact sheet.

 Palliative Care New South Wales: [www.palliativecareensw.org.au](http://www.palliativecareensw.org.au) email: [info@palliativecareensw.org.au](mailto:info@palliativecareensw.org.au) tel: 02 9206 2094