

EAPC task force on volunteering: what progress has been made?

“ In many European countries, volunteering is an integral part of hospice and palliative care. However, volunteers are not always recognised for the role they play in the multidisciplinary team,¹⁻³ and there is still much to learn about the nature, range and level of their involvement.

The European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC) Task Force on Volunteering in Hospice and Palliative Care,⁴ launched in December 2013, has focused on five main areas of work:

- a baseline survey of volunteering in hospice and palliative care in Europe
- a White Paper on the role, contribution, position, identity and value of volunteers
- a charter for hospice and palliative care volunteering in Europe
- international symposia where volunteers, paid staff and researchers share knowledge and ideas
- a stories project aimed at capturing the experiences of volunteers and volunteer managers, which will be started later this year.

The survey, conducted by the University of Bonn, comprised three questionnaires: one for national hospice and palliative care organisations, one for volunteer managers and one for volunteers. Data collection is well under way and we are planning to publish the findings in 2016.

A draft White Paper has been written. Data for this paper were gathered from a review of the literature, focus groups and a consultation with country experts to gain consensus on four key areas: a definition of hospice and palliative care volunteering, a typology of hospice and palliative care volunteering, the unique role of volunteers, and the position (that is, where the volunteers sit in relation to the professional team and patients and family carers) and identity of volunteers.

Findings from the research done for the White Paper have informed the development of a charter. Key points were discussed with delegates at an international symposium on volunteering in Vienna. Further consultation took place at the EAPC World Congress in Copenhagen and through contacts with the task force's members. Feedback was received from a range of European countries and from as far away as Australia. We hope to launch the charter in 2016.

An additional approach to gathering data is through international symposia. These enable volunteers, volunteer managers, other paid members of staff and researchers to come together to exchange knowledge and ideas. The first symposium, 'Colourful life of hospice volunteers in Europe', was held at the 13th EAPC Congress in Prague in 2013 and informed the priorities of the task force. A second symposium was held in Vienna in April 2015 and was attended by over 160 delegates from 13 countries. It explored the future, including new aspects and challenges of volunteering in hospice and palliative care. Findings suggest that many countries face similar challenges in the recruitment, training and retention of volunteers. Different countries also experience a similar trend of changing expectations among volunteers.

The last area of the task force's work – the stories project – has yet to be started. The aim is to gather the experiences of volunteers and volunteer managers, and what volunteering means to them, in their own words and languages. The testimonies will be available online both in the contributors' own languages and in English. We hope that this will help to improve people's understanding of the important role of volunteers, and contribute to the sharing of practices and experiences.

We hope that the work of the task force will deliver new knowledge to support the development of volunteering, and raise awareness of the unique contribution of volunteers to the provision of truly holistic care to patients and those close to them. We also hope that the outcomes of our work will challenge all services to consider whether they truly empower volunteers to use their skills to make a real difference to those in need of hospice and palliative care. ”

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References

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