

# Too early to feed the pipeline? College PC volunteers

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## Introduction

**Background:** The University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) has a unique palliative care volunteer program that has actively recruited college student volunteers since 2010. They provide companionship, legacy building activities, and access to hospital services. There is currently no published research examining the effects of palliative care (PC) volunteering on volunteers in this age group.

**Purpose:** This study examines the personal and professional impacts that palliative care volunteering has had on collegiate volunteers.

## Methods

- 25-question email survey with closed and open-ended items sent to previous and current (2010-2017) PC student volunteers
- Surveys were anonymous, volunteers free to skip any question
- Descriptive statistics used to characterize the sample
- Number (%) of responses to survey items calculated
- Items focused on career path and free text entries were analyzed
- Response rate of 42% (33/78)

## Results

### Early Critical Conversations

- Majority of respondents in sophomore/junior year
- 23 volunteered 2+ semesters
- 32/33 were interested in health care professions

"I had a lot of conversations about death and dying. Some patients were accepting of their condition and others were very scared. It was difficult to have those conversations."

"The very first night I ever volunteered on Palliative Care, I encountered an entire family at the bedside of a loved one who was actively dying after self-inflicted injury."

"It's never easy when a patient dies or is close to dying. There was an older woman who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer [who] broke down and cried... even though you receive training on these situations, it can never prepare you all the way for the first time you experience it."

## Career Decisions

**Q.** Has PC volunteering made any impact on your career plans or choices?

**R.** Yes: 63%

"It definitely has inspired me to pursue a healthcare profession in a field where I can have a relationship with my patient."

**Q.** Has PC volunteering made you more likely to be involved in palliative or hospice care in the future?

**R.** Yes: 71%

"A career in palliative care has now come to light for me. It's definitely an area of medicine that involves a much more personal connection with patients."

**Q.** Did PC volunteering change your view of patient care?

**R.** Yes: 77%

"It emphasized the human connection, gave me experience in starting conversations at the bedside not solely focused on someone's medical illness."

"It provided me with the perspective of knowing that there exists a choice not to do every possible treatment."

"It was a firm reminder that working in healthcare means working with PEOPLE."

## The Ripple Effect

**Q.** Have you initiated any conversation(s) about PC to anyone not already involved with it?

**R.** Yes: 91% spoke about PC to people within their social circles.

In addition, several volunteers joined the unit due to peer recommendations:

"My brother was a Palliative Care volunteer with the UIHC program, and learned a lot from it. His experiences encouraged me to join as well."

"I heard from others within the Palliative Care Volunteering team that it was a much more intimate experience compared to other volunteering options. I decided to give it a try... I loved it."

## Personal Impact

- 96% are now better able to talk to their own family members who have serious illnesses
- 94% have improved their ability to discuss end of life situations

"It changed my life. The experience humbled me greatly and reminded me that life is precious and so are the connections we make with others."

"...volunteering at PC helped with mourning for my own loss while helping others through losses of their own."

"It has had a profound impact on my value for empathy... has helped changed my outlook towards life."

## Lessons Learned

### Listening

"I am learning how to listen more than I speak."

### Empathy

"I value empathy significantly more... the importance of getting to know the patients."

### Being There

"I learned that simply being available to someone can be therapeutic."

### The Story

"Every person has a story worth listening to."

## Conclusion

- PC volunteering may increase likelihood of student volunteers to pursue health and palliative care-related careers down the road.
- Volunteers often serve as an informal speaker bureau about PC.
- The unique exposure and clinical interactions may change student volunteers' understanding of patient care and their outlook on life.
- The important skills these volunteers have gained make them ideal candidates to fulfill the demand for PC workers.

## Next Steps

- Future research will include following student volunteers longitudinally
- Academic medical centers may consider development of similar programs
- PC collegiate volunteer training manual for academic medical centers