The Gift of Presence

Use of Volunteer Vigil Teams & Hospice Singers

Presented by: Tanya Prather
Opportunity

The use of volunteers as an integral part of the hospice team in a Long Term Care facility provides an opportunity to expand the gift of presence throughout a patient’s journey and particularly at the very end of life.
A Look First at Vigils

• Vigils
  – To wait
  – To be present
  – To attend

• A gift of presence to the dying person

• A gift of peace of mind and assurance to family members and LTC staff
Volunteer Vigils

• Purpose is to provide presence at end of life
• Initiated when a person is actively dying
• Volunteer may provide presence if patient has no family local, or when family and friends aren’t able to be there

OR

• Family may request volunteer to sit with them
Particular Need in LTC Setting

• Family/friends often predecease patient
• Children often live at a distance
• Family close by may be frail and elderly themselves
  – May not be able to drive
  – May not be able to be present physically
  – May not be able to be present emotionally
• Family may want assurance of presence when they cannot be there
Volunteer Vigils

- Volunteers are scheduled in 2-3 hour shifts
- Volunteers may be scheduled for overnight, or an 11-7 aide may be brought in for those hours, depending on need
- Facility is notified of vigil schedule
- Vigil is assessed daily and continued until patient dies, or when there is a change to indicate that patient is not actively dying
Volunteer Vigils

• Occasionally vigils are scheduled to provide 1:1 coverage for someone who is not actively dying, but is either *afraid* to be alone, or *unsafe* to be alone due to agitation.

• In that case, a vigil might be part of a larger plan and help to bridge a need until the situation is resolved (i.e. via changes in medication, family arriving, or patient being transferred to a different setting for care).
Important Qualities for Sitting a Vigil

• Ability to pay attention to details
• Ability to be truly present
• Ability to listen
• Ability to care

Recognize that not every dying person wants a vigil
Common Fears and Challenges

• I won’t know what to do
• I’ll do something wrong
• I won’t know what to say
• I’ll say something wrong

If we give in to those fears, we cannot be fully present to the person who is dying
Preparing Volunteers

• Offer vigil training
  – Understanding signs & symptoms of the dying process
  – How to report any discomfort they might see
  – Nearing death awareness
  – How to support family members
  – Helpful tools and resources
  – Self-care
Preparing Volunteers

• Be specific with vigil information
  – What should the volunteer expect?
  – Is the person responsive?
  – Is the person experiencing pain?
  – Is the person restless or agitated?
  – Does the person like touch?
  – What do we know about spiritual preferences?
  – Are there family members involved?
  – What gives the person comfort?
Preparing Volunteers

• Logistics are important
• Give directions if needed
• How to enter the facility after hours
• Keycodes or passwords for locked units
• Every facility has its own culture

Help the volunteer to understand the specifics of your facility and expectations so that he/she can be successful in meeting the needs of the patient, family and your staff
How You Can Support Volunteers

• Share what you know about the person they’re visiting that might enrich their interactions

• Provide feedback or make suggestions if you have them

• Listen to their observations

• Let the volunteer coordinator know if a volunteer is not a good fit for a particular patient or your facility
Volunteers Should Be…

• Wearing their hospice badges
• Checking in at the nursing station when they arrive
• Reporting any relevant observations or concerns to staff
• Letting you know when they leave
• Documenting their visits as directed by hospice provider
Next: A Look at Hospice Singers

- Music at the Bedside
  - An offering
  - Creating space
- Song touches on a very deep level
- Opportunity depends on where receiving person is in their journey
Benefits of Hospice Singing

• Opportunity to reminisce
• Contributes to relaxation and comfort
  – Breathing
  – Heart rate & blood pressure
  – Pain
• Connects on a deep level
• Can be used to assist transition in actively dying patients
Principles of Therapeutic Music

• Live music offered in a private setting
• Adjusted in real time based on both verbal and non-verbal feedback
• Differs from the use of music as entertainment
• Can be used at all stages of illness
• Music offered varies based on situation
Preparing for a Sing

- Gathering information so that appropriate music can be offered
  - Where is the person in the course of the illness?
  - How has music been important in his/her life?
  - Will family or friends be present?
  - In what setting will the Sing take place?
  - Are there spiritual or faith traditions that might impact the choice of music?
Key Concepts

Entrainment

• We are rhythmic beings: breath, heartbeat
• The beat in music interacts with our body’s rhythms
• This concept can be used to calm someone who is agitated
• It also impacts what might be sung for someone who is actively dying
A Process Sing

• Offering earlier in the process when person is responsive, able to interact
• Opportunity to Reminisce and reconnect to music or experiences that have been important in life – may be more upbeat
• Care and connection in community
• Safe space to release emotion
• Moment to experience something beautiful
A Vigil Sing

• Offering near end of life
• Person may not be responsive
• Music should gently facilitate, not disrupt dying process
• Stay away from familiar songs or music with a strong beat
• Offer calm, soothing music
• May choose music in other languages
Contact

More information available through:

Tanya Prather
Patient Care Volunteer Coordinator
Home Health & Hospice Care

tanya.prather@hhhc.org
603-557-2806