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Case Report

Impact of a Teenage Musical Volunteer on End-of-Life Care: Effects on Hospice Patients and the Volunteer

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Abstract

This report documents the case of a middle school student who served as a musical volunteer in a hospice ward in southern Taiwan. It analyzes the impact of this volunteer experience on both terminally ill patients and the volunteer himself. The findings aim to highlight the potential benefits of integrating younger volunteers into palliative care settings and the unique contributions they can make to end-of-life care.

Introduction

Research suggests that patients in hospice care who engage with musical volunteers often experience a higher quality of life [1]. For adolescent volunteers, participation in musical activities within the hospice environment can be profoundly transformative. However, in many Asian cultures, longstanding beliefs often regard the presence of children or adolescents around critically ill patients as “taboo” or potentially bringing “bad luck” [2]. Consequently, the involvement of teenage musical volunteers in hospice settings is relatively rare in Taiwan. This report shares the experience of a middle school student serving as a musical volunteer in a hospice ward in southern Taiwan and explores the impact of these volunteer activities on both the patients and the volunteer.

Case Presentation

A 56-year-old pharmacist was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer and underwent a series of examinations and treatments for one year before being admitted to our hospice ward. The patient had a passion for violin music and frequently attended live musical performances prior to his illness. Through a referral from the hospice ward social worker, a 13-year-old music student, volunteering at our nursing home, was invited to perform bedside for the patient (Figure 1). Following the performance, the patient appeared emotionally moved, with tears in his eyes, repeatedly expressing his gratitude by holding the volunteer’s hand. Two weeks later, the patient passed away peacefully. His wife requested that a thank-you card be given to the young volunteer through the social worker. Upon receiving the card, the volunteer expressed shock at the patient’s passing within such a short period. Nonetheless, the hospice team recognized the volunteer’s significant contribution, despite his young age, in providing the patient with a meaningful final experience, allowing him to relive the beauty of music and fulfill his last wishes with gratitude. The young volunteer, understanding the profound impact of his role, expressed a willingness to continue serving as a musical volunteer in the hospice ward. In the following years, he continued his volunteer work for hospice inpatients.

Figure 1: A teenage volunteer plays the favorite songs of a hospice patient.





During his high school years, he organized a charity concert involving dozens of young musicians to support the palliative care unit. His efforts not only brought comfort to the patients but also inspired many of his peers to join as musical volunteers at the hospital.

Discussion

Palliative care units are often perceived as solemn and distressing environments, leading family members or caregivers to refrain from playing uplifting music within the ward. As a result, patients who are music enthusiasts rarely have the opportunity to enjoy music once admitted to hospice. The National Cancer Institute highlights that music can help manage fear, alleviate feelings of abandonment, and foster a sense of dignity and connection at the end of life, significantly contributing to the mental and psychological well-being of terminally ill patients [3]. In this case, the patient, nearing the end of life, expressed profound emotion at being able to experience live music once again at the bedside, which brought considerable comfort to the family as well. In Chinese culture, there is a prevailing taboo that considers hospital visits by children or adolescents, particularly to see critically ill patients, as potentially bringing misfortune or causing intangible harm [4]. Families may sometimes prevent young members from accompanying their seriously ill relatives out of concern that they may struggle to accept death or cope with grief [5]. Contrary to these beliefs, some studies imply that the involvement of teenage volunteers in hospice care may help alleviate a patient's longing for their younger family members or evoke reflections on their own youth, thereby facilitating a meaningful life review for terminal patients [6-7]. In this case, the patient's young children were seldom present in the hospice ward. As a result, the musical volunteer, a middle school student, was able to resonate deeply with the patient and solace in a distinctive way, despite not being a professional musician. A key consideration for palliative care units when recruiting young volunteers has been whether adolescents possess the maturity to overcome the fear of engaging with terminally ill patients and cope with the potential sense of loss following a patient's death [7-8]. In recent years, with the gradual promotion and increased openness of death education, the age group receiving such education has been trending downward [9]. Previous studies have demonstrated that participating in musical activities within a hospice setting helps teenagers develop essential life skills such as empathy, leadership, and teamwork [10]. This aligns with the observed high emotional intelligence and positive attitude demonstrated by the musical volunteer in this case. The unique environment of a hospice could enable adolescent volunteers to engage in meaningful service, fostering personal growth, a deeper understanding of life and death, and the development of a strong sense of purpose.

Limitation and Suggestions

This case involved a teenage volunteer who had several years of experience in a nursing home before being recruited into hospice care. He also had access to significant support from family members with medical backgrounds, which may have positively influenced his ability to cope with the emotional challenges of hospice volunteering. When involving

adolescents in palliative care settings, it is advisable to include team members with professional expertise to guide the development of essential skills such as communication and compassion. These skills can foster the intrinsic value of life and helping others, which may shape their future life choices. Additionally, the provision of timely grief counseling is recommended to support the psychological well-being of young volunteers exposed to end-of-life care. Long-term follow-up studies are warranted to assess the continued growth and development of adolescent hospice volunteers and to better understand their emotional and psychological trajectories.

Conclusion

Under the supervision and guidance of healthcare professionals, teenage musical volunteers can enhance the quality of life for end-of-life patients and have a positive, inspiring impact on death education and personal growth for the adolescents themselves.

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