



The role of the volunteer

One of the most important concepts underlying hospice palliative care is meeting the world from the ill person's view and not imposing your own views and values on the family or ill person. In order to do this, we must accept other ways of seeing and thinking about the world.

Volunteers are not there to convert people, to take people over, but to be good listeners and effective helpers. This means being able to tolerate their own anxiety and to be able to stand back many times from their own value systems to allow the client to be free, to be self-determining and to respect the fact that the client is free to reject help at any time.

You cannot prevent a person from dying, but you can foster a sense of dignity and respect by being an affirming presence and witness. This person may be yearning for the impossible, whether it is a cure or the opportunity to do something that he or she can no longer physically accomplish.

As a volunteer, you can:

- Acknowledge you've heard the request
- Validate the wish or the thought behind it without judgement or giving advice
- Ask what else might be desirable if the immediate wish cannot be granted
- Use positive body language: open hands, uncrossed arms, eye contact

Ultimately, individuals are the experts on their bodies and knowing what they need, right up until the moment of death. The person is terminally ill – not incompetent – and wants to be accepted as is, including their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Always remember that it is the client's journey, and you are the passenger and travelling companion.

– Vernon & District Hospice Society, 2005

Important qualities for volunteers

- Emotional maturity
- Sensitivity and understanding
- Tolerance and patience
- Tact and discretion
- Empathy
- Flexibility
- Dependability
- Listening skills
- Ability to work within a team
- Genuine commitment
- Sense of humour
- Time
- Comfort setting personal boundaries
- Openness