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Vigil Volunteers in Palliative Care - Opportunities and Challenges

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Topic: P: Volunteering

Background/aims: In Denmark professional caregivers cooperate with formal organized vigil volunteers in palliative care to citizens who are imminent dying. The volunteer sit with the dying when no one else is there and offer relief to the next of kin. It is imperative to be aware of experiences drawn from existing cooperation practice if sustainable volunteer-professional caregiver-cooperation is to be maintained and developed in future palliative care. This study aims to investigate challenges and/or opportunities associated with vigil volunteers in homecare and nursing homes.

Methods: Data was collected through participant observations and interviews. The study is a part of a Ph.D. completed in August 2022. Two formal organized vigil volunteer groups provided access to observations of vigil watching and access to their formal group meetings. Three nursing homes in two municipalities gave consent to participation. A phenomenological sociological everyday life approach was used, and thematic analysis structured the analytical process. Concepts rooted in Symbolic Interactionism interpreted the empirical data.

Results: The study was based on 65 hours of participant observations and 13 interviews (8 individual and 5 group-interviews) with a total of 27 informants (13 volunteers and 14 professional caregivers). Analysis revealed five overall themes: 1) Time to stay 2) Relief that matters 3) Boundaries yes- but not without exceptions 4) Institutional traditions -barriers for dialogue 5) Knowledge and competencies.

Conclusions: The study concludes that time Vigil volunteers have to sit at the dying's bedside and offer relief to the next-of-kin relief contrasts the time professionals can offer these care-tasks. Boundaries are marked and maintained by both parties but also overstepped and stretched based on situation-specific care. The study points to the importance of challenging existing institutional cooperation-traditions to strengthen dialogue and mutual knowledge between volunteers and professional caregivers.

Conflict of interest to declare?: No

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