

Reflections from the Bedside of Dying Patients

I walked into a room with its lights glaring and television blaring, a room where a man I had never met before would take his final breath two hours later. The attending nurse kindly dimmed the lights and turned off the television. I sat down next to him. I felt panic. I felt sadness, and I felt peace. This individual would have passed without me knowing, yet I was there with him; he wouldn't be alone.

The No One Dies Alone (NODA) chapter at Jefferson launched in May, 2016. It launched as a vision in which students of Thomas Jefferson University would volunteer their time to offer their compassionate companionship to dying individuals who would otherwise be alone. Our chapter's mission originated in Eugene, Oregon back in 2001 after a nurse, Sandra Clarke, CCRN, was unable to offer her dying patient the companionship he had requested and she felt he deserved. She fought vigilantly for her vision, and now over 300 programs exist nationwide with Sandra's vision at their core; Jefferson is proudly home to one more – the only student volunteer chapter about which we are aware.

Jefferson's highly interprofessional and supportive community allowed for students to oversee NODA's growth, development, and success. As student volunteers, we come together from all professions to offer compassionate care to individuals in need. Our service offers respite to our hard-working nurses who want to see their patients receive the best care possible, and to the families who cannot be present. While our primary goal is offering our supportive presence to those who are dying who would otherwise be alone, our program is truly special, and our service extends far beyond any mission statement ever could.

Our program remains in its infancy, but continues to grow, and I'm so proud of what our team has accomplished. A nurse recently expressed that he thought our service was "just the most wonderful thing" in reference to a vigil our student volunteers performed earlier that week. That was at our fifth vigil, or "activation,"

as we call them. Our first activation occurred on May 12, 2016, where a third year medical student coordinated a Jefferson nursing student and second year medical student to the bedside of a patient in shifts. The coordinator described how he could feel his presence having a calming effect on the patient as he delicately helped her through her final moments.

Given NODA's small starting volunteer base and fragmenting infrastructure, last summer we were at risk of losing this amazing program we'd started. This was extremely troubling, knowing there were others out there who would need us. Demonstrating such value during its first implementation alone, the future success for NODA was absolutely worth fighting for.

Second year medical student, Patrick Kukulich and I teamed up to fight for those who would benefit from our vision for NODA here at Jefferson. We reached out to the Jefferson community for help, and volunteers came forth from across the professions, as the service of compassionate companionship sees no professional boundary. We've doubled our volunteer base since the summer, and have established a motivated and talented interprofessional leadership team. Experiencing the value of teamwork as NODA grows has been truly inspiring. When I began my professional education at Jefferson College of Pharmacy, I never imagined that I'd be leading an interprofessional team in creating such a unique program. Evidentially, my place as a student of Jefferson University allowed me to seize such an opportunity, and I feel truly grateful.

Volunteering for No One Dies Alone has provided me with invaluable introspective experiences that may have otherwise been intangible. Furthermore, the processes required to implement this program required me to push my comfort zone into uncharted territory. Breaking these grounds and building NODA with my interprofessional team continues to

manifest as an incredible adjunct to my personal and professional development.

Patrick Kukulich shared his experience as a medical student stating that he is "...constantly inundated with facts and figures referring to disease processes, symptomatology, lab values, etc. It becomes very easy to get lost in the data, and the hours spent memorizing information that I have yet to see translate to bedside care can be quite dehumanizing.

That being said, serving as a compassionate companion for No One Dies Alone offers me, as a medical student, the chance to be human again; although it can be grim, these experiences cast a light into a room of shadows and remind me what it is like to be a fragile, sensitive, being, and all of the vulnerability that comes with the human experience.

Volunteering with NODA allows me to put my brain to rest, to forget the clinical data for just a few hours, and really take the time to connect with a patient on a whole different level – an opportunity that I will likely never get again as a resident or an attending. In a word, the experience is remarkable."

Our NODA team shares a special connection, which hones our ability to empathize, respect, and communicate on an interprofessional level. The team grows stronger with each patient encounter, subsequent reflective session, and soon, monthly didactic meeting. While a person's inevitable passing is the premise of our presence, their death can nonetheless be difficult. We respond to the news of their imminent passing in a way which parallels that of a dear friend.

We do our best to support each other through the difficult times. Our reflective sessions following the death of a patient under our companionship are of particular value to our volunteers. They provide us with the opportunity to work through our

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experiences together, and to better prepare us for the next time. Our didactic meetings scheduled to begin this spring will provide further opportunity to share, reflect, learn, and better the NODA experience. Included in these meetings will be the opportunity to learn from guest speakers on the death and dying process, as well as about

interprofessional competencies. For those who are brave and are willing to embark on this journey with us, volunteering for No One Dies Alone provides an incredible and unique opportunity for interprofessional development and education. Please be in touch with any questions or if you are interested in volunteering with us.

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