

Volunteers in Stroke Rehabilitation

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Background

Meeting the needs of stroke rehabilitation patients and providing optimum care can be a challenging task for all rehabilitation team members. Tapping into all available resources can enhance the functioning of the rehabilitation team, as well as allowing for better support of the patients and their families.

Volunteers are a resource that can contribute significantly to healthcare. Today's hospital volunteers are more diverse than ever. They range from teenagers to retirees, come from a variety of backgrounds, and bring a multitude of professional and life experiences. Volunteers have made important contributions to stroke rehabilitation¹⁻³; less is known about how to build programs to optimize this contribution.

Study Question

What is optimal volunteer participation in complex stroke rehabilitation?

Study Purpose and Objectives

- To identify and understand the current role of volunteers in stroke rehabilitation.
- To understand the facilitators and barriers to volunteer participation.
- To identify the characteristics of "optimal volunteer participation".

Methods

Participants

59 neurological rehabilitation staff, administrators, and volunteers were recruited from a complex rehabilitation hospital.

- 9 administrators
- 8 ambulatory care clinicians
- 20 inpatient rehabilitation clinicians
- 22 volunteers

Data Collection & Analysis

- Key Informant Interviews & Focus Groups:** Interviews and focus groups were conducted using an interview guide approach. Interviews were conducted until new information added only minor variations to the themes.
- Document Review:** Policy and procedure documents governing the recruitment, training and management of volunteers were retrieved and underwent a content analysis.
- Environmental Scan:** Researchers contacted other leading national and international rehabilitation institutes to explore volunteer engagement in their stroke rehabilitation programs.

Results

Researchers identified 4 components of a 'high value' or optimal patient-oriented volunteer program. These components were noted to be appropriate for other clinical settings and programs.

Optimal Volunteer Engagement

| Right Person | Right Program | Right Training | Right Structure/Support |
|--|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer skills match role requirements • Personal attributes: consistent, reliable, flexible, committed • Understands own motivations for volunteering | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligns with patient, clinical and organizational goals • Volunteers function as members of the team, augments the rehabilitation experience • Co-created between volunteer resources and clinical teams • Having a range of opportunities that meet both patient and volunteer needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers receive comparable depth and breadth of training as other staff • Volunteers receive in depth program specific training/education • Training/education is delivered by the most appropriate team member | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situate volunteerism in line with core business of improving patient experience • Clear job descriptions, roles, responsibilities and scope of practice • Consistent, regular engagement between clinical units and volunteer resources |
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"I think that volunteerism is a resource that we absolutely need in healthcare. Not just from having their physical presence but they create an opportunity for us to think differently by forcing us to step outside the healthcare world."
(Staff member - clinician)

"The ideal volunteer is a committed, knowledgeable, interested individual who is involved with the team to enhance patient experience and augment the services we already provide ..."
(Staff member - clinician)

"As a volunteer, I really want to make the patient's life and experience here a little better"
(Volunteer)

"Ideally you want the volunteer to be able to do an activity that they have the skills to do, and that they feel like they're contributing to the organization...but you want it to align with their goals as well."
(Staff member - admin)

Dr. Nelson leads the Hospital Volunteerism Knowledge Network. This network is designed "to share knowledge and foster collaborative work related to the development of best practice volunteer programs designed to positively impact patient experience and health outcomes". The results of this research and future interventional studies will be available through this Network.

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Conclusion

Volunteers are key human resources in hospital settings. With enhanced understanding of how volunteers fit within stroke rehabilitation, clinical settings can build programs that optimize their involvement. This focused engagement of volunteers can support high quality rehabilitative care in an era of fiscal constraint.

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