

Integrating Ethics: Resources for Integrative and Alternative Health Care

Volunteerism and Pro Bono service
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For most of us who consider ourselves part of a community, it feels good to make a difference. We're naturally drawn to wanting to help. People who are generous, who help other people, and who contribute to their communities through time and money are generally liked and admired. We also rely on the generosity of "patrons" to support non-profit services, to provide funding for artistic ventures, and to make up for gaps in society's ability to care for those "less fortunate" than ourselves.

This theme is repeated in popular movies (Play it Forward) and in religious texts. Islam, Judaism and Christianity teach that charity and giving are critical attributes of their followers. Charity is listed as one of the five pillars of Islam, and is called Tzedakah by the Jews. Charity that promotes self-sufficiency is especially revered. In the Christian bible faith, hope and charity are the three virtues, and the letter to Corinthians says charity is the greatest of these three.

There are always countless ways to make an impact by donating money. You can also give your time and skills. Many professionals also volunteer in the arenas of state and national service for their profession by serving on boards and special committees or task forces. Details on that service are addressed in a another chapter.

Be careful of your reasons for offering to volunteer or provide pro bono services. Charity can be a two edged sword that promotes dependency and self doubt, or offers a much need benefit that strengthens and empowers those receiving services. The primary goal of volunteer and pro bono work should be to support a client or organization partly through increasing their sense of self worth and ability to solve other problems themselves or through less charitable means. It can be difficult and certainly takes some time to sort out the most effective way to help. Programs or opportunities for education, prevention, direct services, and with some defined goal may be helpful places to begin.

Combining volunteer work with a professional identity can seem self-serving, yet there are countless examples of professions that incorporate "pro bono publico" (literally from the Latin "for the public good") work as part of their ethics of professionalism. There is an expectation that lawyers, doctors, and other professionals who offer essential services will provide some low cost or no cost services for low-income clients or non-profit groups. A goal or commitment to "aspire" to a certain number of hours of pro bono service is often spelled out in an ethics requirement or even state licensing requirements. The National Federation of Paralegal Associations states in its Model Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility and Guidelines for Enforcement that a paralegal

“should aspire to contribute 24 hours of pro bono service annually”. The American Bar Association recommends 50 hours per year of pro bono contributions in its ethics document.

Volunteering and pro bono work are different. Volunteering can take many forms, and often falls outside of your particular area of work or expertise. Pro bono service is providing low or no fee access to what you would normally do for pay, within your field of specialty.

The value of volunteers is no small thing. It can literally be the linchpin that allows a program to succeed and provide a higher quality service. An example of this is Arbor Hospice, which relies on one of the largest volunteer staffs in my local area. Over 350 active volunteers contribute to their Ann Arbor, Northville and Trenton offices. Kappy Pennington, former Director of Volunteer Services for Arbor Hospice described the program and how volunteers are a key component of the care Arbor Hospice provides for those with terminal illnesses as well as their family and friends.

Medicare requires that 5% of patient care be provide by volunteers, so volunteers are not only welcome at Arbor Hospice they are a requirement to be reimbursed by Medicare. Kappy thinks that this requirement might be derived by Hospice operating as a volunteer driven organization. “Hospice is a team approach – the social workers, nurse, chaplain, the volunteer, they have an interdisciplinary approach.” This holistic approach allows for unique contributions from each team member. The volunteer “being a neutral party” who may be better positioned to interact with the patient.

“The volunteer can listen in a way that is not a burden to the family – the volunteers are usually non-professional people or in a non-professional role. Patients often feel more comfortable bothering a volunteer and not a busy nurse.” Because of this more neutral role, “a volunteer may more easily accept a patient and where they are”.

“The organization wouldn’t survive without volunteers. Volunteers make hospice possible.”

Volunteering

Volunteering can provide satisfaction and rewards that lead to long-term relationships. Volunteers at Arbor Hospice tend to stay. There are many volunteers who have been part of the organization for 15 or even 20 years. Kappy said that they tend to back away right away if the work is “not in their comfort zone – which is OK. If they stay then they’re kind of hooked. Students have a limited commitment, a lot come back even if they’re not obligated to and say ‘we love it so much’”

Volunteering can provide valuable experience and perspective. Many of the student volunteers at Arbor hospice are pre-med. “A lot of them want to become doctors. They want that patient interaction. For many the experience has a profound affect on their caring for people as individuals.” They have the experience that “it’s not just the disease but the person. In hospice the disease is no longer the important focus. We are involved in managing symptoms so without the disease [diagnosis and treatment] you better relate to the individual.”

Volunteers can become important and trusted members of an organization or community. The professional hospice staff has come to rely on and appreciate the volunteers. Kappy described the relationship as “really positive – when they get into crisis they come to volunteer services and ask for volunteer support. The volunteers provide support in their jobs, not to take over their jobs.” Even the therapy dogs are welcome by the staff as well as the patients, with Kappy relating that she has gotten requests that the dogs come and visit the administrative staff as well.

At the time that I spoke with her, Kathy Litchney had been a nursing assistant at Arbor Hospice for more than 6 years. When asked, she was more than enthusiastic about the way volunteers contribute to the organization. “The volunteers are the gift to us in all ways. You’re giving us a gift – it enables us to be reenergized. You can’t measure this gift that the volunteers have given to the staff. You are the gift to Arbor Hospice and what you give is priceless”

“The volunteers are just astounding. They are an extension of what we can’t do – which enables us to give the excellent care we can give.” Far from feeling that the volunteers might be doing the nursing staff’s work Kathy repeated Kappy’s sentiments “We welcome the volunteers with open arms – they are a joy and an asset – and an integral part of the team of caregivers. They complete the team. If we didn’t have the volunteers we wouldn’t be able to give the total care we have today. They’re all heart – they are unselfish dedication and loyalty.”

Pro Bono Work

Low or no cost work provides needed services to those who would otherwise be denied access. Low income clients, students, people who were unable to work because of health concerns, people facing difficult financial challenges, are frequently cut off from equal access. With insurance only rarely paying for holistic and alternative care and the price for such services steadily increasing, the clientele for most alternative practitioners remains white, middle and upper middle class, and well employed. Those who provide these services are also predominantly white, with backgrounds dominated by college educations and good access to resources. As alternative health care becomes more mainstream, the conjoined questions of access and responsibility should be part of our dialogue. As with other essential services, we have an obligation to provide pro-bono services for people and organizations who might not otherwise

be able to benefit from complementary and alternative medicine.

Not everyone can afford health care. If alternative health care is truly important, it should also be accessible. In the '70s and 80's especially, there was a lot of unfamiliarity with the holistic approach to health care and talk about "prosperity consciousness". Many practitioners refused to see clients who could not afford their services or who were not already convinced of its value. The reasoning, if it can be called that, was that if they really wanted to have the service, they would manifest the money to be able to afford it. This elitism and "cop out" (to borrow another term from that time period) meant that only those who had access to money would be able to take part in the growing field of holistic health care. Pro bono contributions can increase that access to people who may be new, undecided, or just unable to afford trying methods not covered by insurance, or that has a significant out of pocket expense. Low income populations, especially those struggling with poor health, need access to options.

What are the dynamics of providing a free service to someone who gives nothing in return? Does this alter the therapeutic relationship? Can it result in guilt, lack of participation, perceived obligation, and ultimately take away from the benefits? This argument has been put forward long enough and strongly enough that it is worth some consideration. Even with individuals who are good with communication, and able to address their individual issues and possible transference concerns, it adds a dynamic to the relationship that could potentially be harmful.

Being aware of those concerns in advance can help, as well as how you set up the pro bono relationship. Certainly we hope to do more good than harm, and pro bono service has a long history of success.

It is interesting to examine the features that work in other settings where services are given for free. The legal setting is an instructive model. The use of pro-bono services is usually focused on a particular problem or situation. Lawyers rarely make themselves available for free in a way not tied to a specific case. An exception is lawyers who make themselves available to an organization on an on-going basis, such as a non-profit organization where it is understood that resources are limited, and the actions of the organization are offered for the public good. Doctors may make pro bono arrangements, frequently by donating services to a clinic, or special event such as a blood drive or immunization clinic. Again it is focused, time limited and for a specific problem or situation. Structure may help giving work more easily. It may also get in the way.

Pro bono work isn't the only option. Waiving a clients bill, or not charging for a specific service is normally done on a case by case basis, and usually when there is already an existing relationship where the professional can take into account the context and circumstances. Even then, this information is often best communicated through a third party such as the nurse, receptionist, or at

arms length through the billing process. Examples of successful pro bono work show that the presence of a third party is often a key factor. That isn't always an option for self-employed alternative health care providers. We tend to have more intimate and direct contact with our clients. That helps in better knowing their needs, but can also increase the intensity and intimacy of the relationship.

If unfamiliar with donating services, work through a third party or agency who is working with a specific category of need. For example, donating hours to hospice, clinics seeing clients with HIV, working with newborns, donating time at a nursing home, sports events, health fairs, working with new international students who are stressed, doing workshops at a teen center, offering to support La Leche League clients; these are all possible outlets for pro bono work.

Promoting your for-fee work in the context of volunteering or offering pro-bono services allows you to receive some tangible benefit for your generosity. If you are working within an organization, it would be wise to ask for guidelines ahead of time, so that your gift of service doesn't become blatant advertising and solicitation, but do not miss out on a chance to promote your professional practice if it is appropriate. If you are in doubt, it may be best to forego any promotion that may seem self-serving.

Tip jars and other requests for money gives a mixed message, and can confuse the relationship. Similarly, a call for "donations" should specify who will receive the donation, and a suggested donation amount is often appreciated. Calling money that you will keep a "donation" can be considered deceptive.

By providing pro bono service, you're ensuring that a larger population can have access to valuable health care, and that all forms of health care should be available to people who can benefit from it. As a profession, we may not be able to help everyone all the time, but certainly we can make it one of the values we encourage in our peers and ourselves.

Additional points on volunteering and pro bono work:

- If you are part of a professional organization, propose that your ethics policies include a provision to provide pro bono services, with a suggested number of annual target hours.
- Volunteer without increasing your stress. If you are having a health crisis, or are otherwise temporarily unable to donate it's OK to focus on your own needs. If you have young children you may not have the time or energy to volunteer. But once your kids are older, you'll provide a valuable role model for them by volunteering. You may be able to include them as well.
- Set a target number of hours, with 26 per year (an hour every other week) as beginning minimum. Tithing can be in hours of service, not just a

percentage of your income.

- It is helpful to target your volunteer services – low income, HIV positive, new parents, kids with special needs, senior citizens, non-English speakers, there are numerous groups who can use support. You can either seek out people from those categories, or offer pro bono work when they come to you.
- Some of the best volunteers are former clients or service recipients. How have you been helped? Can you give back to that person or agency that helped you?
- Volunteering can expose you to professional development opportunities, such as the pre-med students mentioned above.
- Set boundaries. The number of hours you can reasonably give, when you will work, and where. If you are eliminating the conventional fee for service, you don't need to also change how you conduct your business. Written agreements and policies are helpful, outlining details of services and any terms or conditions.
- It may be easier to start volunteering or providing pro bono work through an agency or organization rather than making arrangements and setting boundaries on your own.
- Make arrangements for periodic evaluations, and renegotiate the arrangement if needed.

Quotes:

"They feed with food the needy wretch, the orphan, and the prisoner, for love of Him, saying, 'We wish for no reward nor thanks from you.'"
Qur'an 76.8-9

"Every person's every joint must perform a charity every day the sun comes up: to act justly between two people is a charity; to help a man with his mount, lifting him onto it or hoisting up his belongings onto it is a charity; a good word is a charity; every step you take in prayers is a charity; and removing a harmful thing from the road is a charity."

Forty Hadith

Source: an-Nawawi 26

"If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving & sharing, they would not eat

without have given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift." –

The Buddha

Source: Itivuttaka Sutra

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

the Letter to the Corinthians by Paul

Source: I Corinthians (ch. XIII, v. 13)

“Lady, you know no rules of charity, Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses.”

William Shakespeare

Source: The Tragedy of King Richard the Third (King Richard at I, ii)

“Every charitable act is a stepping stone towards heaven.”

Henry Ward Beecher

“Every good act is charity. A man's true wealth hereafter is the good that he does in this world to his fellows.”

Mohammed

“Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind.”

Henry David Thoreau

“The measure of life is not its duration, but its donation.”

Peter Marshall

Wikipedia:

“There are two major benefits of volunteerism:

1. economic: activities undertaken by volunteers would otherwise have to be funded by the state or by private capital, so volunteering adds to the overall economic output of a country and reduces the burden on government spending.
2. social: volunteering helps to build more cohesive communities, fostering greater trust between citizens, and developing norms of solidarity and reciprocity which are essential to stable communities.”

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