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PALLIATIVE CARE SOCIAL WORK – THE LEADERSHIP ART OF THE CHAMELEONAnne Cullen *Princess Alice Hospice, Surrey, UK*

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Focus of the study The study was informed by a literature review that identified similarities between the characteristic values and skills of social workers and some recent descriptions of close ‘charismatic’ or ‘transformational’ leadership, especially an account of the role of the leader as ‘servant and partner’.

Methodology The method adopted was to undertake a qualitative study of palliative care social work in a hospice in the south of England. Specialist palliative care social work was selected as a likely source of examples of social work practice ‘at its best.’ The main fieldwork activities undertaken were semi-structured interviews with social workers and other members of the hospice’s multi-disciplinary team, followed by a final workshop session.

Findings The study showed that social work practice in this setting was driven by an attitude of profound respect and sustained availability, which included a commitment to ‘being with’ people in circumstances of intractable suffering. Specific mechanisms were identified through which social workers used professional skills such as adaptive communication, sensitive risk management, systemic thinking and improvisation, to enable service users to identify and express their priority needs, to mobilise their own distinctive abilities and strengths, and to optimise their use of informal support networks. By making these insights accessible to the multi-disciplinary team, social workers promoted the ability of service users to function as effective co-experts within the distributed leadership dynamic of the multi-disciplinary team.

Presentation The presentation provides a detailed analysis of the processes through which social workers supported service users to discover and exercise their own capacity to be ‘leaders in our own lives’; and how this contributes to a more practical understanding of what is involved in ‘servant and partner’ leadership.