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VALE, VOLUNTEERS AT LIFE'S END: THE LOROS CARE HOMES PROJECT

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Background Supporting people in the last hours of their life has a particular importance: a human presence may reduce fear, and agitation and promote a peaceful dying; provision of a 'sacred space' performing rituals or an environment of valuing of the person's way of life and beliefs may be a consideration; and witnessing the passing from life to death.

Aim LOROS developed a novel pilot service recruiting and training volunteers to work with care homes to compliment their care of dying residents. The aim was to explore the feasibility and evaluate its added value.

Service development A three day training programme was developed for 9 volunteers : learning hand massage; a focus on common features of dying; features of dementia; and discussing the role and potential impacts on the volunteer. Volunteers developed 'comfort packs' containing readings, music, massage oil and religious icons. A regular support structure was developed.

Four care homes developed operational frameworks for contacting and integrating volunteers in to their team. Leaflets provided information to service users and processes were developed to discuss the service with residents and relatives.

Outcomes Over seven months three of the four care homes utilized volunteers with 10 residents. Most residents who died did not need the additional support of a volunteer and some volunteers were not utilized. Where volunteers did provide support it was highly valued by staff and by relatives. Volunteers enjoyed the work and despite being needed infrequently there was no attrition.

Application to practice Hospice trained and supported volunteers are welcomed by care homes as part of their care team for dying patients. The need for their service is infrequent and unpredictable and when it does occur it is immediate and intensive. These practical factors make it difficult service to provide.