

Personal Reflections on Palliative Care Volunteers Conference 2010

The theme of this year's conference was "*Searching for Balance*" - and the diversity of workshops, onsite visits and plenary sessions during this 2-day gathering certainly highlighted the importance for each of us to strive towards meeting a healthy balance in our lives. Easier said than done I hear some of you say however Sister Angela Mahar's workshop on *self-care* reminded me of the accumulative emotional toll experienced by all working in the palliative care services. Caring for others comes at a cost unless preventative efforts are made to take time out and renew oneself on a regular basis.

A highlight for me was listening and participating in the *Healing through Music Therapy* workshop with music therapist Carolyn Hart. Carolyn spoke about how singing, song-writing, listening to music and improvisation can improve the quality of life and provide symptomatic relief during palliative care. For example physical symptoms such as breathlessness or pain can be distracted by singing. Indeed people can sometimes sing when they can no longer speak as music is one of the earliest skills to develop and one of the hardest to destroy. I was interested to hear about the leaving of musical legacies such as performances or songs and Carolyn played a song from a CD "Living Soul" which is a compilation of songs by cancer patients at Royal Melbourne Hospital. One of the key issues that I recall from this workshop is that music is a very individual experience and this fact was reflected in the differing reactions to a piece of instrumental music played during the workshop. An enthusiastic group part singing exercise closed this workshop which was great fun!

After a reviving cup of coffee and Danish pastry it was time for the *Complementary Therapies* workshop. I found the more intimate small group session with a complementary therapist a great opportunity to catch up with what other volunteers are doing elsewhere in this area. The head massage was also appreciated!

I chose not to travel on the support services tour but from all reports it was an informative and worthwhile afternoon even if it was a long one.

Day 2 started with a warm welcome from Uncle Lewis before the 4 plenary speakers addressed the audience in raising important issues with relation to palliative care treatments and its effects on patients and their families. The disadvantages faced by those living in regional South Australia continue to be significant and this issue was discussed during the workshop I attended on *It's my*

life – It's my death with Janine Haynes who spoke about the reluctance of Aboriginal people to leave their land and engage with health services in distant centres. I found the information about “Ngangkari” (traditional healers) and the importance of their role in being present alongside traditional medicine to be most interesting. Peta Jackson’s workshop on *Indigenous Resource Kit* highlighted for me how ongoing cultural awareness education for organizations continue to be important in the delivery of culturally appropriate health services.

Dr Tabitha Healey’s presentation *Intimacy & Physical Relationships* on the effects of a cancer diagnosis and therapies on the nature of patients’ closest relationships was confronting but at times funny and energetic which was something to experience on a Friday afternoon post-lunch!

Thanks Trish and the rest of the organizing committee for your input and enthusiasm. The high standard of presenters and the overall buzz generated during the two days left me with a really positive vibe.

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