VALE: Volunteers At Life’s End, the LOROS Care Homes Project

Background
Supporting people in their last hours of life has a particular importance: a human presence may reduce fear, and agitation and promote a peaceful dying (1); provision of a ‘sacred space’ (2); performing rituals or an environment of valuing 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.

Approach Used
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.

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 Hospice 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 a difficult service to provide.

References
No One Dies Alone. Sacred Heart Hospital Oregon:

Megory Anderson. Sacred Dying: http://www.sacreddying.org