Taking oral histories to improve end-of-life care

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Oral history interviews with patients who are nearing the end of life can play an important role in preserving dignity and enhancing feelings of self-worth. 

What is an oral history interview?
The oral history interview allows patients to talk about themselves with no medical or clinical matters. Interviewers do not ask about a patient’s diagnosis and therapy. They are well trained, supported and supervised and would inform nurses if they were concerned that someone was upset about their life.

Developing the service
The idea for the service came about in 2003 when, after working as a nurse and doing a history degree and a PhD in oral history, I interviewed patients for research while working with the Hospice History Project at the University of Sheffield. The aim was to add their voices to this record of the growth of the hospice movement. One person I interviewed had motor neurone disease and his wife was so pleased with the interview she said the opportunity to record a life history should be a service for end-of-life patients.

It was a light-bulb moment and, after a long quest for funding, the service was finally set up with the support of Sheffield Hospitals Charity. A few years later in 2012, Macmillan Cancer Support provided pilot funding to enable the oral history service to spread to five other sites in Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Winsford and Antrim.

Nurses who listened to interview clips began to see the value of an oral history service. One of the nurses was fascinated to listen to an interview with a patient who was a well-known DJ on the 1980s Sheffield music scene. She realised that she knew him and it brought another dimension to the nurse-patient relationship.

The oral history team has worked hard to gain the trust of staff, who were initially worried that the interviews could potentially harm patients in some way. However, this has not been a problem. Our volunteer interviewers are well trained, supported and committed to preserving dignity and enhancing feelings of self-worth.

Oral history interviewees found the process to be dignified and satisfying.

For more information about oral history in palliative care please see www.sheffield.ac.uk/snm/research/oralhistory

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