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Editorial

Harnessing the Therapeutic Power of Volunteering

The idea that individuals who help others incur health benefits themselves suggests a novel approach to improving health while simultaneously promoting greater civic orientation in our society.

—Schreier et al¹

One of the endearing attributes of the annual holiday season is its bestowal of a multitude of opportunities to live the adage that “It’s better to give than to receive.” There are many forms of giving, including donations of time, physical work, money, and expertise. One of the more common forms of giving is by volunteering, the offering or provision of helpful service without pay to others who are usually outside one’s immediate family.² Those recipients might be individuals (eg, homeless persons), small groups (eg, 2 families displaced by a hurricane) or organizations (eg, the Salvation Army), or a broader swath of society (eg, populations fleeing their homeland to escape war or famine).

Volunteering is a familiar activity to many AACN members who contribute countless hours every year toward meeting the mission and goals of our professional specialty nursing organization. For these critical care nurses, volunteering with AACN may be motivated by an interest in contributing to an organization that needs their expertise for one of its programs, to pay back an organization that has been pivotal to their career, or to support colleagues who need

assistance in completing or publishing a report on their first quality improvement project. As we traditionally view the value of volunteering, all of these altruistic engagements focus on their benefit to the recipient.

If AACN members are already familiar with volunteering and may practice it with other professional, social service, religious, educational, or environmental entities, why should critical care nurses take any additional note of this particular form of giving? One rationale could be from the accumulating evidence, gathered informally and formally, that suggests that volunteering is not just associated with paying it forward to the intended recipient, but likewise extends to paying it backward to the volunteer. Another intriguing finding from this literature is that among the benefits associated with volunteering is a substantial number of health benefits, suggesting that the affirmation “It makes me feel good” represents a considerable understatement of the actual physiologic beneficence accrued. Rather than repeating a description of the beneficial outcomes of volunteering from the point of view of the recipients, we can note where those have already been ably addressed³⁻⁸ and focus this editorial on benefits to the volunteer.

Benefits of Volunteering to the Volunteer

Although the state of the science related to the beneficial outcomes of volunteering to volunteers is barely inceptual in its development, there is sufficient evidence to warrant at least

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Table 1 Career benefits of volunteering

- Explore new fields of work^{10,11}
- Acquire or enhance new skills^{8,10,11}
- Obtain work-related experience^{8,10}
- Have greater odds (27%) of finding a job after being unemployed compared to those who do not volunteer¹²
- Among those who lack a high school diploma, have 51% greater odds of finding employment compared to those who do not volunteer¹²
- Among those who live in rural areas, have 55% greater odds of finding employment compared to those who do not volunteer¹²
- Establish contacts for a work network⁸
- Improve quality of résumé⁸
- Teach useful skills to others⁸
- Have an increased likelihood of finding employment regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or location or market conditions compared to those who do not volunteer¹²
- May afford hiring preference, higher salary, or promotion¹¹

one group of researchers to study whether those findings suffice for health care professionals to consider volunteering as a public health intervention.⁹ Before we can address the feasibility of that proposal, let's take a brief scan of the existing literature on that aspect.

From the volunteer's point of view, the reported benefits of volunteering range across career, social, and health dimensions. Of these, the career and social gains are more familiar because many of these may also represent an individual's personal motivations for serving as a volunteer. For example, Table 1 lists a number of the reported career-related benefits that volunteers may enjoy. Some of these, such as obtaining work experience and acquiring new skills, may influence a person's decision to volunteer for a particular organization or program. Similarly, Table 2 lists some of the social benefits that volunteers receive. Outcomes such as meeting new people and expanding one's social network may also reflect a person's impetus for engaging in a particular volunteer activity.

The beneficial outcomes of volunteering that may be less frequently acknowledged are those related to enhancing the volunteer's mental or physical health. As the summary of study findings in Table 3 indicates, a substantial volume of literature suggests that there is a positive and, in some cases, enduring association between serving as a volunteer and health benefits. It would also be useful

Table 2 Social benefits of volunteering

- Meet new people, make new friends^{8,10,13}
- Demonstrate caring to and about others⁸
- Feel needed and valued by others^{8,13}
- Reciprocate for past assistance received from others⁸
- Role model values to the next generation⁸
- Make a difference in someone else's life⁸
- Improve social support and strengthen social network^{4,10,13,14}
- Greater feeling of belonging in a community^{10,11,15}

Table 3 Health benefits of volunteering

Mental health benefits

- Improved affect¹⁶
- Improved sense of well-being and satisfaction with life^{3,15,17-24}
- Improved quality of life^{4,25-29}
- Lower rates of depression^{4,22,24,29-36}
- Reduced stress/psychological distress^{28,37-39}
- Increased self-esteem^{4,8}
- Greater sense of meaning and purpose in life^{5,15,16,27,40-45}
- Greater sense of achievement and motivation¹⁷
- Escape from everyday routines and demands; achieve better work:life balance¹¹
- Improved coping with one's own illness^{25,26,39-41,46,47}
- Expanded social interactions and support system^{41,42,47-49}
- Improved family functioning⁵⁰

Physical health benefits

- Improved affect¹⁶
- Improvement in self-rated health^{22,23,28,29,33,34,49,51-53}
- Greater longevity^{10-14,24,33,35,36,54-56}
- Improved ability to carry out activities of daily living^{22,24,33,52}
- Better health coping mechanisms⁴
- Reduced cardiovascular risk factors: lower cholesterol, interleukin 6, and body mass index¹
- Less hypertension⁵⁷
- Adoption of healthy lifestyles such as disease prevention,³⁹ increased physical activity,⁵⁸ and responsible amounts of drinking⁵⁹
- Lower incidence of frailty in later life⁶⁰
- Fewer hospitalizations²⁹
- Improved pain management⁴⁶

to note that some of these findings reflect significant rather than slim health gains. For example, a dozen separate studies have reported that volunteering is associated with a statistically significant lower mortality risk for those who volunteer compared to those who do not volunteer (Table 3). A meta-analysis of 5 of those studies⁶¹⁻⁶⁵ completed by Jenkinson⁹ revealed a 22% lower mortality among volunteers compared to nonvolunteers. Mortality differences of that magnitude warrant our attention and further investigation for practice implications.

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