Social models of leg care post-Covid-19

A qualitative exploration of motivations, experiences and priorities of Leg Club volunteering

1. Background

The Lindsay Leg Clubs are psycho-social care organisations, promoting longterm social health and well-being through developing a sense of community among a population of older adults with, or at the risk of developing, leg problems. Leg Clubs operate as partnerships between patients ('members'), healthcare professionals and community volunteers.

Covid-19 meant the Leg Clubs temporarily suspended their operations. They have since re-opened and are now reviewing their operations to support their community in the 'new normal' (Lindsay, 2022). The requirements of Leg Club volunteers to continue supporting members' community after the pandemic require attention. This study explores the experiences, challenges and priorities of Leg Club volunteers in the post-Covid-19 world.

2. Method

Data collection involved qualitative semi-structured interviews with 16 volunteers in three Leg Clubs, conducted between May and August 2022. All interviews were face-to-face. Fourteen interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were analysed thematically using an inductive approach to coding, with transcripts read repeatedly to derive themes.







3. Findings

Motivations

Some volunteers started as members or as companions, fell in love with the Leg Club care model and returned as volunteers.

Others were freshly retired individuals with a strong sense of purpose to give back to community.

Yet others emphasised the emotional, social and mental health reasons: working through stressful and traumatic life events or sustaining social health and well-being endangered by isolation. Coming into the Leg Clubs to make meaningful connections with others helped improve volunteers' mood and reduce stress.

Experiences

All volunteers stressed the enormous satisfaction from providing care and assistance to others:

- small acts of kindness, such as welcoming somebody at the door, offering them a cup of tea or a lift back home
- providing material assistance, such as supermarket vouchers to those not in a financial position to pay for healthy food
- a lifeline of social support to most isolated members

All forms of help activated volunteers' 'reward centres', which, quite simply, made them feel happy.

Most volunteers praised the opportunity to build meaningful social connections with members of their local community. Volunteering for the Leg Clubs gave them a chance to meet new people and solidify these connections through repeat weekly encounters. But building social connections did not come naturally to all volunteers; others spoke of constructively challenging themselves in the psycho-social Leg Club set-up. By taking their attention away from their own worries and re-focusing on others, they reported experiencing personal growth.

Recommendations

- 1: Leg Club volunteers who wish to contact their peers should have easy-to-access, possibly digital, communication channels to do so.
- 2: The Leg Clubs could consider whether, and if so, how, there could be an opportunity to bring younger individuals into the Leg Clubs to increase the potential volunteer pool.
- 3: Advertising in local health centres/surgeries, on community notice boards and community fairs; on social media (even if such online campaigns might not reach all potential volunteers); and publishing in local community in print, online, on radio and TV media.

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4. Priorities

Continued concerns about the long-term capacity to return to the prepandemic levels of activity in the social areas. Uniting objective for all Leg Clubs: desire to recruit more volunteers.

Volunteer 6 Leg Club 2: "...the lack of volunteers really, is... is... we need more volunteers."

Volunteer 1 Leg Club 1: "...quite a few have left, unfortunately". It must be admitted that some of the volunteers left for very personal, family reasons, which were independent of the pandemic. Nonetheless, Volunteer 2 observed that the feelings of anxiety, stress and related emotions associated with 'the new normal' may have also played a role in reducing the number of active volunteers (as well as members).

Volunteer 9 Leg Club 3: "I will need more volunteers, I might need more drivers".

5. Conclusion

The motivations and experiences of Leg Club volunteers have not changed because of Covid-19-related lockdown Leg Club closures but Covid-19 has meant that there may have been a drop in the availability of Leg Club volunteers and a priority for the future is for the Leg Clubs to continually recruit new volunteers.



