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Coping with the loss of a library patron: a call to medical libraries

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Abstract

Our small hospital library staff was shocked and saddened to learn of the death of one of our regular patrons, someone who embodied the societal struggles that our safety net patients face daily. After searching the library literature and seeking guidance from colleagues in medical libraries, we discovered that there is a lack of literature and communal discussion about this topic in our field. By sharing our experience with the process of grieving and celebrating our patron's life, we hope to begin this conversation within our profession and encourage other library workers to share similar stories and experiences.

Our hospital library environment

Zuckerberg San Francisco General is a safety net hospital that serves San Francisco's most vulnerable populations. In the city with one of the highest costs of living in the United States,¹ our patients are often battling with a multitude of social determinants of health: poverty, institutionalized racism, homelessness, unemployment, interpersonal violence, and lack of education and social support. ZSFG Library, located at the hospital, often provides a haven for

these patrons: the library is a place to come inside, use the computers and restrooms for free, and be treated with dignity and respect. The library makes a special effort to offer patient engagement services and resources including consumer health books, digital literacy tutoring on request, individual consumer health research help, and patient portal engagement support. Our library staff strongly believes in the hospital's mission of service to the underserved and this is reflected by our commitment to provide compassionate service to everyone who uses our space. ZSFG Library staff and patrons often share a unique relationship, similar to those held at other libraries that serve patients and the public. At ZSFG, our regular patrons are woven into the community; we come to know about their lives and they know about ours. We often learn about their medical conditions, their relationship history, and their current situations, the good and the bad. One of our regular patrons was named Brice.*

Brice's story

Brice came to San Francisco from the Midwest in the early 2000s. As a black man who identified as gay, he sought space from his conservative upbringing and the freedom to live as he chose in the San Francisco Tenderloin. Sadly, things took a turn for the worse over the last ten years. Not long after moving to San Francisco, he got a hard diagnosis and at that time gave up on his life as it was. He went from having steady housing to living in a tent under the freeway which is known as "tent city" and had encounters with the criminal justice system, including being arrested several times. In early 2015, Brice walked into the library and his first words were "Yes, a sister is here." From that day forward, he would come in every day to use the computers and sometimes even sleep. A year before his death, Brice was dragged from his tent and beaten badly to the point that he was hospitalized.

Learning of the loss of our patron

Last year, we learned of the sudden death of Brice. ZSFG Library staff were all saddened by this news. Iesha, our library assistant who works full time at our public-facing information desk, was especially affected by the news. In her words:

One of our regular patrons came into the library a little before closing with a look on his face as if he'd seen a ghost. He asked me if I heard the news, and I was at a total loss to what he was referring to. I asked him what news and he said that they had found Brice dead in a tent. My first reaction was this is not true because I had just seen him a few weeks before and his words to me were "Girl, I'll see you next week." However, after doing a little research, I was able to find out that the information was true: Brice had died two weeks earlier. I was at a total loss and heartbroken at the same time, wondering if he died alone, if anyone had notified his family back home, and what would happen to his body since he was homeless. I had all these things running through my head at the time, not really sure how to process my feelings. Brice was more than just a member of the public: he became a friend and was someone I looked forward to seeing in the library on a regular basis. We had formed a bond to where we were able to talk about everything. It was to the point that he felt comfortable telling me about his personal life and all the challenges he was faced with from being beaten by random people on the streets and having his personal belongs taken from him on a daily basis whenever he would fall asleep. He even talked to me about his relationship with his family. Brice strongly expressed to me that he was ready to go back home and that his sibling was paying for a

round-trip ticket home. Unfortunately, he passed away before he was able to make it back.

Coping with our library's loss

Library staff reached out to Sojourn Chaplaincy, the hospital's multi-faith Spiritual Care department initially for support. One of our hospital chaplains, Claire, responded to the call and came to the library to offer one-on-one emotional and spiritual support for staff. Chaplain Claire sat with staff to provide a compassionate presence and a space for staff to share their emotional process around the sudden and unexpected death of this beloved patron. Through conversations with staff, our chaplain helped to facilitate exploration of different ways that our library community could respond collectively to this loss. As a team we decided on several ways to honor Brice's impact on our community. The first and most important step was to honor our grief by creating space for it. We build relationships at work with the people we work with as well as the people we serve. When a workplace community loses a member, one of the most important ways leadership can respond supportively is to create space for the grief process. We decided we would create some physical space to honor Brice and hold a memorial service for him in the weeks to come.

Creating a physical space to honor Brice and our grief over his death was another way we were able to support each other. There are a number of different ways this kind of honoring can be done-- from announcement materials like a flyer to putting out flowers to more abstract expressions like an empty chair with the person's name in it. We decided to create a "memorial table" at the library for Brice. On this table we placed a cloth, a photograph of Brice, an electric candle, some flowers and a note about the upcoming memorial we were planning. This table

allowed us a physical reminder of the loss our community experienced as well as a way to communicate Brice's death and information about the memorial to our regular patrons.

Several weeks after Brice's death, we had a small memorial service that was open to everyone. The service was primarily attended by staff but a number of patrons expressed appreciation that the memorial service was being held. Chaplain Claire began the service by sharing some words about why we were gathered and then read a poem. Next, we each talked about how we were feeling and said something that we remembered about Brice. Creating space to remember together and share stories and feelings was a key dimension of this gathering.

We also talked about feelings of anger and frustration at the societal injustices that Brice faced as a black, gay man living on the streets. Libraries are one of the last public spaces where a person can sit indoors without the expectation of spending money. As a result of the shrinking accessibility of indoor public spaces, libraries are increasingly frequented by people living at the economic margins of our communities. We try to hold our hospital library as a welcoming space, and accessible to all who would like to utilize our services. Our memorial for Brice also helped to surface feelings that we have around the limitations of an economic system that pushes people like him to the margins and helped us to clarify our commitment to serving those at the margins.

We also talked about adding Brice's name to the altar for Dia De Los Muertos, an annual offering that the hospital's Sojourn Chaplaincy provides for hospital staff and community members to honor patients, staff and community members who have died. Additionally, we talked about the memorial service that happens at the hospital each year to remember homeless members of our community that have died and the annual interfaith homeless memorial held by community organizations.

One thing that has given us hope throughout this process has been the way that Brice's memory has been held by our larger community, including both the interfaith community and the community of people living on the streets of which Brice was an intricate member. We have connected with others who were grieving this loss, and it has been supportive to connect with others whose hearts were also heavy over the death of this beloved member of the San Francisco community.

Reflections on the loss of library patrons

In an effort to support her colleagues and cope with the loss in her own way, our librarian, Jill, searched the library literature to find resources or stories from other libraries that had experienced the death of patrons. A moving tribute by academic librarians at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas discussed their reflections around the passing of their librarian colleague;² this was the only relevant resource found in the library literature. Surely, with the number of severely ill patients that hospital libraries, cancer libraries, and other medical library settings interact with, many library workers have experienced the passing of library patrons. Given public librarians' growing role in administering naloxone to patrons in need, library workers in these settings must also experience the loss of patrons in their libraries. How, then, do libraries support their staff in coping with these losses?

We found some answers from the Medical Library Association's Hospital Libraries Section and Cancer Libraries Section. Ten librarians responded to a request to share their stories and experiences with the loss of patrons in their libraries and how they coped with these losses; these responses are summarized here. Medical librarians have experienced the passing of patrons, library colleagues, and volunteers. Sudden deaths and those in younger people were

especially hard, and some felt that because patrons or volunteers weren't technically "colleagues", people didn't understand their grief. Many librarians mentioned dealing with the uncertainty around patrons who they haven't seen for a while, especially those who are very ill, and wondering if they have survived; this lack of understanding and closure is especially difficult. We all cope with loss in different ways: some libraries have established relationships with their chaplains, and counseling services are available at several hospitals. Libraries support memorials for patrons, colleagues, and volunteers who have passed, such as plaques, memorial plants in the hospital garden, book plates, special pictures, condolence books and regular flower deliveries. Several hospitals hold annual memorial services for hospital affiliates, including patients, staff, and volunteers, who have passed away each year, and these have a range of library participation. Some libraries hold their own memorials or dedicate other events to the memory of patrons; examples include bicycle ride outings, golf tournaments, fundraisers for scholarships, and annual library hikes. Library staff have also written obituaries in staff newsletters, attended funerals, and visited with surviving family and friends.

A call to medical libraries

As library workers, much of the public service work we do requires emotional labor, or the effort required to manage one's emotions to meet organizational expectations.³⁻⁴ As women make up the majority of public-facing library workers, emotional labor, then, affects us disproportionately and is taken on with little regard to its costs.⁵ In medical and public libraries in particular, emotional labor contains an additional layer of complexity when we are faced with illness, death, homelessness, and other social determinants of health in our patron interactions. As non-clinical staff, most of us are not trained to deal with the emotions that can arise from

these interactions, yet we are expected to manage them in order to present ourselves as friendly, neutral professionals who should not express negative emotions.⁵⁻⁶ The myth of library neutrality⁷ inhibits our relationships with patrons and prevents conversations about the very real emotional effects of our work in medical libraries from taking place within our field. Many of us have experienced the loss of patrons, colleagues, and library volunteers, and our roles as information providers and safehavens for the most vulnerable in our society ensures that we will continue to experience these losses. It is necessary for us as a profession to recognize the emotional work that we do and take steps to support each other in dealing with grief around the loss and uncertainty that comes with serving our patrons.

Grief is different for everyone. Because there is no clear definition of the relationship between library worker and patron, our grief and grief responses can be complicated. Acknowledging the fact that library workers may grieve patrons who have passed is the first step to addressing this issue in medical libraries. Recognize and validate feelings of disenfranchised grief, or grief experienced when incurring a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.⁸ Make time in library staff meetings to check in about how your staff is coping with the emotional labor of serving our patrons, whether these are patients with cancer, homeless patrons, or those suffering from opioid use disorder in a public library. Advocate for libraries in your institutions: support relationships with hospital chaplains and social workers. Work with other non-clinical groups in your institution, like interpreter services, chaplains, porters, and cafeteria staff to see what mechanisms their departments have in place for coping with the loss of patrons that they work with. Investigate collaborations within your institution and community around regular memorial services for patients or homeless folks who have passed. As medical library workers, we can support each other by creating spaces, both

at conferences and virtually, to share our stories and experiences, especially for solo librarians or those who do not have support from their libraries or institutions. Let's support each other and create a caring professional community that responds to loss and grief in a trauma-informed way.

Conclusion

We believe that libraries are never neutral. In our society, it is a radical act to care for folks who live on the streets with love and compassion. We have been moved to learn about the care provided to Brice in his life and to see that care continued in his death by our ZSFG Library community. We encourage all library workers that are coping with the loss of patrons and colleagues to share their stories and begin to create a culture of compassion and caring within our professional community.

Some Guidance around Grief Support

Unfortunately, not all hospitals and medical libraries have spiritual care services available for support after the death of a patron. Here are some tips for organizing a simple memorial service in a workplace in the event that you do not have access to chaplain support.

1. Be mindful of religious diversity

While the majority of Americans identify with some form of Christianity, there is a significant amount of religious diversity in the United States. Religion and spiritual practice can be very personal and for some religious minorities, workplaces can feel like a dangerous place to disclose religious or spiritual identity. Even in an area that is very mono-cultural and a large majority of people identify with a religious tradition, unless you have explicit consent from

participants to have a religious service, consider excluding religious texts or prayers from the service. If you are organizing a service in a workplace, be aware of the cultural and legal expectations of your organization. If you have questions about the content of something you're reading in the service, check in with your Human Resources department. They may be able to help you identify potential areas of vulnerability.

2. Openings and Closings

Within human religious expression, there is a tremendous amount of diversity. Spiritual traditions have a broad range of ritualizing grief and memorials. One thing that is common in most ritual is some sort of act symbolizing a beginning and an end. From the Muslim call to prayer to a Christian benediction, there are many ways to indicate to participants that a service is beginning or ending. In creating a multi-faith or non-denominational memorial service, creating an explicit beginning and end can help participants understand what is happening and create the tone for the service. Some sort of words to express a welcome and a close at the end can be helpful. Additionally, a reading, song and/or moments of silence at the beginning and end of the service can create a sense of intensity that is appropriate for the emotional intensity of grief.

3. Sharing Memories

After you have set the tone for the memorial with a welcome and an opening, participants can share stories and memories of the person who has died. Sharing memories and feelings helps to bring comfort to the bereaved and normalize the grieving process. Most people are not eager to speak quickly in this kind of a context, so it helps if you can do some preparation work beforehand and invite people to come prepared to speak. You can do this more explicitly by

spelling out that this will be invited on a flyer for the memorial or you can talk with participants individually one-on-one before the service to make sure that some people speak. You might also bring appropriate poetry or writings and have them available for people to read if they would like to share but can't find the words from their own experience.

4. Have Support Resources available

Loss of a loved one through death is one of the greatest challenges we face in this life. The grief process is often non-linear and complicated. While the patron you are memorializing may not be as close as a family member or beloved friend, new grief often touches on old grief. Because of this, it's not uncommon for past challenging and intense experiences of loss to come up in this process. This is normal and can also feel challenging for leadership if a staff person becomes emotionally expressive. Having support resources available at the memorial service can be helpful for staff who are significantly impacted by the loss. A list of resources like the hospital's spiritual care department, the employee assistance plan and/or contact info for the mental health care services available for staff can be very helpful if staff is struggling. You also might consider having the service towards the end of the day so that staff can go home shortly after the memorial.

*The patron's name has been changed to protect their privacy. We worked with our hospital's Privacy Office while writing this paper and have made minor adjustments and omissions where necessary to protect our patron's privacy and identity. We recommend this process to others interested in sharing their patrons' stories.

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