

REGULAR VOLUNTARY SERVICE AND EMERGENCY PUBLIC ACTION

Last winter's industrial disputes in the health service made volunteering seem not so much a complementary activity, more an alternative to paid work. Sandy Duncan explains why we should use the word 'volunteer' with care

When is a volunteer not a volunteer? The latest answer to this eternal conundrum may be: when there's an industrial dispute!

Our latest winter of discontent, with its particular impact on the National Health Service, should make us all more careful about what we mean by the word 'volunteer', whether we're using it as a noun or as a verb.

Most volunteering would seem to be activity by people offering their services without financial reward — what The Volunteer Centre has termed 'regular voluntary service'. Sometimes these 'regular volunteers' help the NHS direct, sometimes they help indirectly through a voluntary organisation.

But sometimes volunteering is of an emergency rather than regular nature. And the events of the past winter reveal that some voluntary organisations have a strong element of 'emergency service' as part of their *raison d'être*. The Red Cross, the St John Ambulance Brigade and the WRVS all show themselves as ready to serve in times of emergency. All three are proud of the training they offer their members. And in some areas, such as ambulance services, they have both the training and the equipment to enable them to provide a realistic alternative service to that provided by paid staff.

Sharp focus

The starkness of such alternatives was brought into sharp focus last winter. Calls for the public to come forward to replace striking health service personnel — often couched in emotive language — were supposed to be justified by the extreme nature of the emergency. No doubt some health districts were in a state of real emergency. But for most, adequate emergency cover was maintained by qualified staff. Even so, some who carried responsibility for the maintenance of health care deemed it necessary — perhaps rightly — to call for 'volunteers' to provide a service which was a clear

alternative to that being withheld by paid staff. Clearly, those responding to the call were not volunteering in the shape of 'regular voluntary service'.

The Volunteer Centre felt it important to distinguish between these different types of activity. Our chairman, Professor Adrian Webb, issued a statement to the press drawing a distinction between 'regular voluntary service' and 'emergency public action'. In our view, the Centre's *Guidelines for relationships between volunteers and paid non-professional workers* were designed to cover the former, but were not intended to cope with the latter.

It was interesting to discover that Voluntary Service Co-ordinators in strike-hit hospitals were often maintaining this distinction in the way they handled the crisis. One VSC ensured that members of the public responding to her administrator's emergency appeal were dealt with by the administrator, did not pass through the voluntary service office, and were not issued with volunteer's overalls.

This VSC herself volunteered to assist the administrator but she removed her own badge and was identified as another member of hospital administration. The stated aim of all this was to ensure that staff would not associate regular volunteers with those members of the public taking emergency action.

Sensitive

Likewise it was interesting to discover that regular volunteers who helped in the emergency action were often sensitive of the need to be clear about the difference of identity and did not wear the uniforms or badges belonging to the organisations through which they offered their regular voluntary service.

Yet another activity termed 'volunteering' was the work undertaken by management or administration to fill the gap left by striking ancillary staff. In this context, 'volunteer' meant a member of staff in receipt of full pay doing the work of a striking colleague. In other contexts very different words are used. Interestingly, this bit of alternative volunteering was acceptable to the trades unions whereas calling on the public to take emergency action was not. Could it be there was a certain

pleasure in watching one's manager do the unpleasant parts of one's duties?

Outside the health service there was another variation on the 'volunteer' theme. In one closed shop area, home helps were called out on strike. Strike they did, only to return to do their normal work on a voluntary basis.

The word 'volunteer', then, can mean different things. And if it means 'emergency public action', who decides that a situation has deteriorated to such an extent that it can or has to be called an emergency?

Volunteering implies choosing or offering to do something. It can also imply that the activity brings no financial reward. With regular voluntary service, both meanings usually apply. But then both are also true of emergency public action. It would help if the health service and the media would not refer to paid staff doing other people's jobs as 'volunteers'. If they have to have a word for it they could use another, albeit more emotive one — blackleg.

Traditional

Some thought must also be given to the traditional idea that volunteers and paid staff can work together because they do different tasks. There are many tasks which lie outside the scope of volunteers: how many times have you heard the quip about volunteer brain surgeons not being required? But perhaps there's a tendency to use this extreme example to avoid facing up to the fact that there are many tasks that can be as well performed by volunteers as by paid staff — and, indeed, some which can more appropriately be performed by volunteers.

Surely true alternative volunteer activity does not lie in the nature of the task being performed but in the identity of the person performing the task. If so, it is high time we rethought what we mean by voluntary service being complementary rather than supplementary to the work of paid staff. To explain volunteering in terms of complementary activity is inadequate. Certainly it will be difficult to communicate the concept of an alternative identity, but at the end of the day it may take us nearer the truth.

THE VSC UNDER SIEGE

By Muriel M Hindle

When asked to write my battle memoirs I was none too keen on the title suggested.

'Volunteers Adrift' – Maybe! With myself as Voluntary Service Crusoe? I could only remember that while everyone else was fighting gallantly, knowing exactly which side they were on and that God was on their side, I – as every voluntary service co-ordinator (VSC) is from time to time – was stateless and alone.

MUNICH for us was 17 January. A treaty was still just possible but who was right? Was it better to die than to surrender or should we seek peace at any price? Surely sanity would prevail and someone, somewhere would find a solution.

WAR COUNCIL The light of battle was in people's eyes; there was blowing of bugles, marshalling of troops, planning of strategies. Despite myself I began to be caught up in the excitement.

WAR WAS DECLARED I could not choose on which side I would fight; loyalty must go to the army in which I was enlisted. Yet still I could not hate the foe who had been my comrades in earlier campaigns. But what must be must be. Innocents were a risk and must be protected.

Not for me however the scent of battle, the glory of the last ditch stand. Before the first shot was fired we were ordered to withdraw entirely from the fighting zone.

I suddenly felt left out. Part of me wanted to fight shoulder to shoulder; to share the comradeship and the camaraderie, and part of me grieved for my people in exile.

I effected a strategic withdrawal and retired to nurse my injured pride. What had I left after my little Dunkirk? Something had been salvaged, my troops were shaken but intact and some areas of service remained. These had to be serviced and our position maintained. Supplies already disrupted had to be got through, morale needed to be kept up. New campaigns already planned had to be forwarded in case there was still a tomorrow.

Could we regroup? Many I knew would have joined the Resistance. Was I the leader for such a group? I doubted it! What were my feelings at this time? Confusion? Anger? Frustration? Bitterness? A little of each but above all insecurity and loneliness.

What of our Generals? Could they lead us to victory? Or were they as ruthless and incompetent as their adversaries said. I could not believe so; I had trusted them in the past and they had not failed me. And yet already there were signs of battle fatigue.

And what of the foe? Were they really intent on massacre and pillage? These people with whom I had worked and whom I had respected for their humanity and compassion. Surely I could not be that bad a judge of character. Or could I?

Counsel with friendly neutrals gave me a quick lift but a previously arranged recruitment campaign for an army which now seemed about to be disbanded did not help.

I was at my lowest ebb – could it be only 10 days since the first rumblings of war?

My workload had trebled overnight and yet by staunchest lieutenants were denied to me. I was beaten and I knew it.

The tide suddenly turned. A weekend leave brought me refreshed to a meeting at which I discovered I was not alone. Ours was not the only battle – the conflict was nationwide. Other VSCs had fought and survived.

Encouragement came from many sources; my faithful lieutenant came through the flak to assist. Messages of allegiance were received. We were soldiering on!

Fighting flared in another area, there was momentary panic but we were blooded, we could cope.

Then in a minor skirmish we sustained our first casualties, despatches went astray and a few of our troops wandered into the firing line. Two were wounded, two others slightly shocked – but they were comforted and offered sanctuary by the enemy.

Then without warning we were offered a separate peace, to return with honour and without restriction to our non-combatant duties, and friendly relations were restored with both sides.

There was, just briefly, a vision of leading my Dad's Army to some glorious battle honours or of being called to recruit and lead a vast army of mercenaries, but this proved to be just propaganda and I was left relieved and wondering whether I would have achieved a decoration or an ignominious defeat.

While the war dragged on we welcomed the task of rebuilding. Within 24 hours some services were restored, most were back to normal within a week and all now

have been reinstated. Longterm plans were hardly delayed and we sustained no fatalities – even our wounded are still with us.

True, we have suffered slightly in the chronicles but, as often happens, the loudest critics were outside the battle; their motivations and prejudices are not known to us and they were certainly in no position to know the true facts. Morale is good, the spirit of co-operation strengthening. The battle is over but we are none of us sure that the war is won. Let's hope we have learned something. ☘

Key for non VSC readers!

Munich – the first sign of an approaching strike

War Council – meeting of hospital management heads of department
War declared – the strike. The 'army in which I was enlisted' was hospital administration, the 'foe' the strikers, the 'innocents' the patients

Strategic withdrawal – withdrawal of volunteers. The 'troops' were the volunteers, the 'Resistance' the strikebreakers and the 'Generals' the senior hospital administrators

Friendly neutrals – VSCs in social services and in the voluntary sector. 'My faithful lieutenant' was a volunteer clerical worker and the 'flak' he came through was the picket line. The 'offer of sanctuary' by the 'enemy' was shop stewards taking a pro-volunteer stance

Separate peace – the decision by the unions to allow volunteers to come back into hospital even though the strike was continuing. The 'mercenaries' were members of the general public offering emergency public action. The 'wounded' were the few volunteers who reported for duty only to be turned away

The chronicles – comments by local voluntary bodies and by the press
Throughout the article 'we' refers to the voluntary services department.