



The Value of Social Pedagogical Volunteerism in the Midst of the Greek Economic Crisis: The Example of Voluntary Caring for Patients in the Hospitals (EDANI)

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THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

Caring for common affairs and unconditional service are connected with Greek life and culture and closely related to religious duty and piety. In the difficult days of the economical crisis and recession, offers for organized volunteering have culminated. The Voluntary Caring for Patients (EDANI), is both an organized ecclesiastical activity which wonderfully reclaims scientific knowledge and a model of education, support, supervision and distribution of volunteers. Along with the crisis, the effort has been more thoroughly organized and based on self-devotion, love for the other, social and spiritual sensitivity, EDANI manages to maintain a stable number of volunteers and to multiply its offer to nursing institutions in quality and quantity. It has well-trained and supportive volunteers taking care of patients (adults and children) who have no family environment to support them. In fact, EDANI is conducting social pedagogical work. Its strong social pedagogical character is demonstrated through:

a) its sensitivity and interest in vulnerable groups of people, which is transformed into actual and systematic action; b) the pursuit to enable people to have a better quality of life, which we consider a duty; c) the development of volunteering action, which begins with the intention of an unconditional service and continues with meeting the needs of people who go through a bad situation; d) seeking personal strengthening and involvement of the patients and the volunteers; and e) finally, the vision of well-being for all people.

The media, the volunteers themselves as well as the structure of the Orthodox Church of Greece have played an important role in bringing out this social pedagogical character of EDANI and have contributed to its success. During this period of crisis the Orthodox Church of Greece is promoting the spiritual character of the voluntary offer, organizing the distribution of material, time and money in order to sufficiently support people in need in our country, and has engaged in important religious and social pedagogical work for many years now.

Key words: *volunteering, patient caring, social pedagogical work, Orthodox Church of Greece.*

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Introduction

Caring for common affairs and unconditional service are connected with Greek life and culture, strongly influenced by the need to cover crucial needs during the post-war period and closely related to religious duty and piety. Organized (as well as it could be during that time), unconditional action and offers were manifested: a) through ecological sensitivity with the restoration of damages caused by militant conflicts or bad weather conditions, b) as great cultural activities including events and folk festivals which are still going on today in order for large social or religious groups to meet again, and c) through caring for fellow human beings, charity and piety.

In the difficult days of the economical crisis and recession, organized volunteering has culminated. This work has a strong social pedagogical character. The Greek Orthodox Church plays an important and decisive role in this work. Apart from the multilateral spiritual contribution it also makes an enormous and long-term social pedagogical contribution, especially during periods of crisis (such as the period of the enslavement of Greece, during the prevailing of hostile troops, through times of poverty and deprivation etc.). In the current period of crisis, the Orthodox Greek Church, among other activities, has also put all resources at its disposal to organize common meals, social markets and drugstores, medical assistance and a series of other events. Moreover, it has been assisted by many state institutions (the army, health institutions, private businesses etc.) as well as a large number of similar social actions, with a few exceptions which due to ideological differences chose to act autonomously.

Today this 'social pedagogical culture' of caring and offering unconditionally is organized, coordinated and reconstructed, taking advantage in the best possible way of modern scientific knowledge.

EDANI is that kind of organized effort which develops, trains, coordinates, evaluates, supervises and supports with scientific specifications the voluntary work of people who care enough to offer some of their free time to stand beside lonely patients as if they were people from their circle of friends or family environment.

A short description of EDANI

The *Voluntary Caring for Patients* (EDANI) belongs to the section of Nurses' Catechism of the Second Department of Catechism and Culture of the Archbishopric of Athens, which is the official executive of the Orthodox Church of Greece. It was founded in 2003 and nowadays has 400 active volunteers. The employed scientific personnel consist of 4 social workers and one sociologist. Responsibility for the services of EDANI lies with the manager of the section of Nurses' Catechism of the Archbishopric of Athens. The fundamental goal of the service is to provide unconditional systematic care and support to patients who are lonely adults or children with a poor or even no supporting family, relatives or circle of friends during their stay at the hospitals of Attiki. EDANI makes an effort, especially as far as children are concerned, not to merely offer companionship but to also provide educational content as well. EDANI considers it a duty to provide psychological and social support to all these people, who are already experiencing a bad situation given their illness and absent family, in order to give them a chance for a better quality of living.

The ways EDANI functions

In terms of cooperating with the Nursing Institutions in Attiki, EDANI has co-signed a 'Protocol of Cooperation', which sets some prerequisites and renders their cooperation official. In order for a

case to be taken on, the Hospitals' Social Service sends a referral to EDANI. Then, EDANI's social worker visits and evaluates the case, and with the contribution of EDANI's team it is decided whether and under which circumstances (how many shifts, days, kind of services etc.) the case will be taken on. The services of the hospitals are updated on a daily basis through fax for the volunteers' schedule (volunteer's name, shift, case), thus promoting the security of the Hospitals as well as a confirmed distribution of volunteers. During their shift, the volunteers wear a medical uniform with the service's logo on it and hold a special badge certifying their status. There are three consecutive 3-hour shifts on a daily basis for every patient. Great attention is paid so that the volunteers can constantly access supervision and support from EDANI's social workers throughout their volunteering.

Special small supporting groups

The benefits from the special small (10-15 individuals) supporting groups are very important for the volunteers. These groups, in which all the active volunteers ought to participate, meet once a month under the auspices and supervision of EDANI's social workers. The goal of these support groups are communication, understanding and exchanging experiences with each other, psychological support and encouragement for volunteers. Sometimes, it happens that volunteers get tired or emotional during their service. In some special occasions, the experiences and difficulties they face are shared among the volunteers of the group. They describe the way they handled the situation, and opinions are exchanged in conversations, the incident is evaluated and alternative or better ways of handling them are proposed. In those meetings, the method of role playing is applied, which significantly helps volunteers manage their emotions and comprehend their role and their relationship with EDANI, the hospital and the patient. Through this, volunteers become more self-conscious and self-aware, their already existing abilities are enhanced, new emotional and social skills are developed together with the quality of their services, their everyday life and their self-confidence are improved.

Training at EDANI

EDANI pays great attention to the process of training its volunteers, through which they are theoretically and practically educated to perceive the way they should act when in hospitals and enrich their knowledge on topics relative to a) medical science, b) particular features of certain populations and basic sociological and pedagogical principles, such as dealing with socially vulnerable groups or individuals, the development of emotional and social skills especially in children as well as preventive social pedagogical actions, etc. Every volunteer candidate passes through two stages of training: a theoretical and a practical one.

The **theoretical training** is repeated every year in three cycles including the same topics, so that everyone who wishes to become a member of EDANI can be trained as a new volunteer.

The abilities and needs of the volunteers are also taken into consideration when the topics of the theoretical training are formed. The training is conducted in a special room under the supervision of the Institution of Pastoral Education of the Archbishopric of Athens by expert trainers such as professors, scientists etc. who also volunteer. Such trainers are: psychiatrists, child psychiatrists, psychologists, social educators, special education teachers, managers and heads of clinics, occupational therapists, hospital reverends (priests of the Orthodox Church who work exclusively in health facilities) and social workers.

Indicatively, some topics/ headlines of the volunteers' theoretical training are cited:

- ✦ The Church's volunteers in hospitals and their relationship with the hospital reverends
- ✦ Recruiting volunteers to care for patients
- ✦ Grief in children and teenagers
- ✦ Approaching a sick child's psychological world
- ✦ Volunteers of patients with infectious diseases
- ✦ Child abuse
- ✦ Approaching a patient with cancer
- ✦ People with special needs and their families
- ✦ Boundaries in children's behaviour (how to teach children respect and set boundaries in their behaviour)
- ✦ Patients from different cultures
- ✦ Child-volunteer – the power of support
- ✦ The importance of supporting the volunteer
- ✦ Ecclesiastical volunteering and social volunteering
- ✦ Children with special needs
- ✦ Managing emotional involvement
- ✦ Patients with chronic diseases
- ✦ Disabled children and volunteering
- ✦ The psychiatric patient
- ✦ The terminal stage cancer patient. Treating to relieve pain
- ✦ The elderly patient
- ✦ Children's normal psycho-emotional development and abnormality reasons

The basic goals of the theoretical training are for the volunteers to:

- ✦ acquire enough sensitivity, information and knowledge on fundamental issues related to the voluntary caring of patients and the health facilities, so that they can offer their services safely to the hospital, the patients, and the volunteers themselves;
- ✦ become sensitive towards emotional and medical particularities of patients (e.g. disabled people, patients with cancer etc.);
- ✦ learn some primary tactics for discreetly approaching a patient;
- ✦ expand and enhance their personal abilities, such as listening and communication skills with the patients;
- ✦ be informed about the function, organization and actions of EDANI;
- ✦ understand their role as volunteers and the service's rules.

The next training step is the **practical training**, during which the volunteer engages in a number of services with another volunteer-trainer. Basically, at this point, according to the fundamental principle of social pedagogy, theory meets action. The main goals of the practical training are for volunteers to:

- ✦ practically apply the knowledge that they have gained during the theoretical training, taking advantage of the experience of older volunteers;
- ✦ familiarize themselves with and learn in action how they can perform in health facilities;
- ✦ meet the patients they will take care of alone later and learn about their needs and particularities.

Statistics

The section below shows statistical information derived from the electronic processing of EDANI's action. The charts show the number of services (volunteering shifts), the total number of new case requests in relation to the number that has been served, and the number of EDANI's new volunteers per year.

Chart I: Number of services (volunteering shifts) per year

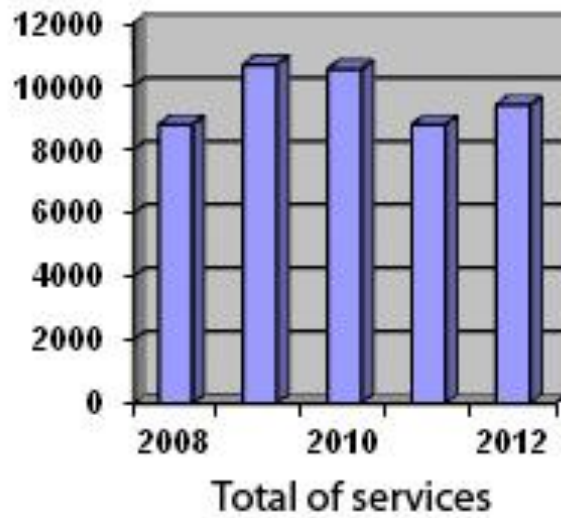


Chart II: New cases per year

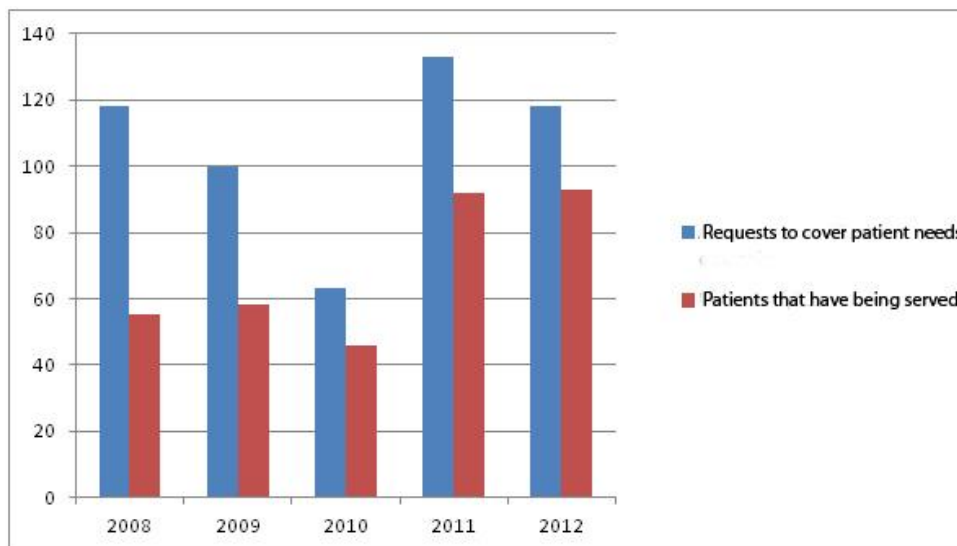


Chart III: New volunteers per year

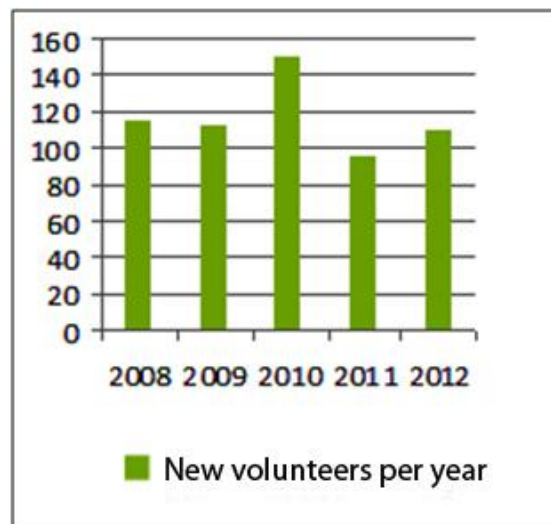


Chart II indicates that in 2011 and 2012 the number of cases significantly increased compared to previous years. That evidence, in relation to Chart III, which indicates that the number of new volunteers hadn't increased at that time, suggests something remarkable. In the middle of the economical crisis, EDANI's volunteers served a significantly larger number of patients than in previous years. This means that they gave more of their time, made a greater effort despite the increasing difficulties that have come along with the economical crisis. We appreciate that risking even their daily time management (the possible need for a second occupation) highlights the strong ethical and social pedagogical reflexes of EDANI's volunteers.

Conclusion

According to our estimation, the abandonment of our fellow citizens, and especially infants, by their family environment or circle of friends does not originate so much from economical difficulties but mainly from the decline and erosion of fundamental moral values. It is also due to personal or family dysfunction, which is essentially a permanent structural social dysfunction not infected/deteriorating with the economical crisis. However, we should be looking at the significant increase of voluntary offers (thanks to the personnel and volunteers' strong social pedagogical reflexes, sensitivity and thorough and systemized efforts) to lonely patients as a particularly positive sign of progress given the economical crisis.

EDANI's social pedagogical role

An important parameter for the formation of EDANI's elements are the ways, means and frequency of projection not only of its needs but the ability to also offer secure voluntary activity. The quest for new volunteers, who will contribute to EDANI's effort, is a crucial parameter of its function as well as a modern social educator in voluntary action. Having that as a target, EDANI organizes systemized events for informing and projecting certain social pedagogical abilities; on the one hand, the ability for secure voluntary activity and on the other the necessity for voluntary action as an offer to the social groups in need. At the same time, it projects and highlights the advantages of personal strengthening and culture won by consistent volunteers as well as the ability of gaining knowledge and experience, and the reinforcement of their emotional and social skills in general, assets that will be appreciated later in their social pedagogical work.

The basic 'external' means of social education and awareness for the projection of EDANI's social pedagogical work and its success were the Ecclesiastical structures as much as their promotion from ecclesiastical and other media (the internet, radio, TV, periodical and daily news). A discreet concern of the advertising of the benefits of voluntary service was to promote volunteering as a positive and necessary social activity first, and then as a manifestation of piety. Moreover, an essential way of raising factual awareness (and education in volunteering) for the public is the reliable, consistent and discreet presence of the volunteers within the health institutions. Their presence and action among the employees, the patients and the visitors in the hospitals is a way for promoting and multiplying EDANI's work. The volunteers themselves play an important role in this promotion as they become more sensitive through their experiences in volunteering and they best promote EDANI's work to their social cycles (work, family, friends).

The Orthodox Church has developed a long-term, consistent social pedagogical as well as spiritual service in Greece, which has become more intense and efficient during all sorts of crises. The Orthodox Church of Greece has always been a factor of influence for society in social pedagogical actions, such as volunteering, while at the same time it reinforces social consistency and weakens indifference and individualism, thus opening the way for cooperation and solidarity among the

members of our society. Given this 'social pedagogical preparation' of the public about volunteering, at this time of crisis in our country, society has become extremely sensitive and proceeded to behaviors of self-devotion, altruism and social pedagogical sensitivity.

Along with the manifestation of the current economical crisis the Orthodox Greek Church can demonstrate a surprisingly increased activity at many levels, in order to nutritionally, ethically, spiritually, psychologically and socially support all groups of people and individuals in need regardless of their origin, religion, language or any other differences. The current economical crisis has provided yet another reason for a factual demonstration of the orthodox ecclesiastical philosophy and amplification of Christian morality and unconditional love, which are both fundamental principles of the Orthodox Devoutness.

In conclusion, supported by and developing within the Orthodox Church, EDANI conducts continuous work in Greece with a strong social pedagogical character which is demonstrated through: a) sensitivity towards and interest for vulnerable groups, which converts into substantial and systematic action, b) the pursuit of helping all people live a quality life, which we consider our duty, c) the development of voluntary support, which begins with the intention of unconditional service and continues with the patients' (adults and children) psychological and social support, d) the quest for the patients and volunteers' personal strengthening and development, and e) the vision of all people's well-being.

***Father Vasileios Kontogiannis:** Born 1949 in Larisa, Thessalia, he served in the Greek Air Force as an aircraft engineer for fifteen years. In 1981 he was ordained as a priest of the Orthodox Greek Church and has served as a hospital reverend in Ippokrateio General Hospital of Athens since 1986. In 2003 he founded *Voluntary Caring for Patients*, which he manages until today. He has been the appointed manager of the newly-founded department of Nurses' Catechism of the Archbishopric of Athens since 2011. He is married and has 6 children and several (27) grandchildren.

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