



COMPASSIONATE
COMMUNITIES
CENTRE OF EXPERTISE



END-OF-LIFE CARE
RESEARCH GROUP



INVITATION TO THE PUBLIC DEFENCE OF SABET VAN STEENBERGEN

TO OBTAIN THE ACADEMIC DEGREE OF

- Doctor of Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghent University
- Doctor of Adult Educational Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

TUESDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 2026, 17H

- Vandehove Paviljoen, Campus Boekentoren, Rozier 1, 9000 Gent
- PhD Defence in Dutch
- Online: <https://teams.microsoft.com/meet/3635162925594495?p=VgzFUhaCUCai1ouKPW>
- Interested in a digital copy of the thesis? Please email sabet.vansteenbergen@ugent.be or sabet_vs@hotmail.com

PROMOTORS

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- Prof. dr. Joachim Cohen (VUB)
- Prof. dr. Sarah Dury (VUB)
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EXAMINATION COMMITTEE

Chair: Prof. dr. Sorana Toma (UGent)

Jury members:

- Prof. dr. Peter Pype (UGent)
- Prof. dr. Sofie Verhaeghe (UGent)
- Prof. dr. Dorien Brosens (VUB)
- Prof. dr. Tinne Smets (VUB)
- Prof. dr. Peter Raeymaeckers (UA)
- Prof. dr. Jeroen Hasselaar (Radboudumc)

DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING COMMUNITY SUPPORT INITIATIVES IN SERIOUS ILLNESS, DYING AND BEREAVEMENT



PROJECT SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Alongside well-developed specialized and generalist palliative care, increasing attention and recognition is being given to preventive and community-oriented approaches to supporting people facing serious illness, informal caregiving, dying and bereavement. Community volunteers and community initiatives are playing an increasingly significant role in this evolution. Community volunteers perform a crucial yet often unrecognized role in identifying care needs, while the societal impact of community initiatives (e.g. compassionate communities) frequently remains under-acknowledged due to a lack of appropriate evaluation methods.

The PhD aimed to develop and evaluate community support initiatives for people facing serious illness, dying and bereavement, focusing on two research aims:

- **Aim 1:** To strengthen volunteers' signposting role in supporting residents with chronic and/or palliative care needs.
- **Aim 2:** To explore the foreseen and unforeseen impacts of a Compassionate Community initiative.

METHODS

The PhD comprises four papers using qualitative and mixed-methods approaches.

- **Aim 1:** Qualitative research explored communication between volunteers and healthcare professionals, informing the co-creation, pilot-testing and mixed-methods evaluation of the Attentive Visitors training to strengthen volunteers' signposting skills.
- **Aim 2:** Ripple Effect Mapping explored the direct, indirect and unexpected impacts of Compassionate Sint-Kruis (Bruges, Belgium), including factors influencing their emergence and sustainability.

RESULTS

Community volunteers frequently identify care needs among neighbourhood residents, but uncertainty about their role, signposting responsibilities and communication with professionals can hinder effective responses. The Attentive Visitors training improved volunteers' palliative care knowledge and self-efficacy in discussing identified needs with community residents and healthcare professionals. Volunteers reported greater awareness of their role, stronger boundary-setting, and increased confidence in communication and signposting. Ripple Effect Mapping of the Compassionate Sint-Kruis initiative revealed various categories of impact including strengthened social connectedness, policy facilitation, new collaborations, and the normalization of conversations about illness, dying, and loss. Relational continuity, local embeddedness and shared ownership supported these developments, while reliance on key individuals and limited resources challenged their sustainability.

This dissertation demonstrates how Compassionate Community principles can be translated into practice and how challenges related to role clarity, information sharing, signposting and volunteer-professional collaboration can be understood through a boundary work lens. It highlights the importance of supporting volunteers in navigating boundaries between informal community support and formal care, while preserving the relational nature of volunteering. The findings also suggest that individual-level outcomes, such as increased knowledge and confidence, may contribute to broader community-level developments. However, these processes are not necessarily linear. By combining intervention-focused evaluation with Ripple Effect Mapping, the dissertation highlights the tension between evaluating predefined outcomes and understanding complex, non-linear and emergent community change.

Future research should examine the sustainability of Compassionate Communities through longitudinal mixed-methods and cross-case studies, and investigate training implementation, transfer into practice, and ongoing volunteer support. Policy and practice should strengthen the volunteer signposting role and collaboration with healthcare professionals, recognise and support volunteers through training, supervision and peer exchange, embed serious illness, dying and bereavement in local policy, and use targeted outreach to engage socially isolated individuals.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Sabet Van Steenberghe (1992) obtained a Bachelor's degree in Social Work from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in 2013, a Master of Science in Clinical Psychology from Ghent University in 2017, and an advanced Master of Science in Human Resources Management from Antwerp Management School in 2018. In 2020, she completed a postgraduate degree in Poverty and Participation at KU Leuven. Following her studies, she gained professional experience in research (both theoretical and applied), as well as in the profit and non-profit sectors. In September 2021, she started working as a scientific researcher within the End-of-Life Care Research Group. Her research experience includes studies on the perspectives and experiences of professional stakeholders working in prisons regarding palliative care and end-of-life care provision in Belgian prisons. In addition, she has conducted research on stakeholders' perspectives on the development of a hospice in the community. In September 2022, she started her joint PhD project entitled "Developing and Evaluating community support initiatives in Serious Illness, Dying, and Bereavement." The focus of her doctoral research includes: the development, pilot testing and evaluation of a palliative care training program for community volunteers (focusing on recognizing, describing, and communicating care needs); and the ripple effect mapping of a Compassionate Community initiative in Sint-Kruis (Bruges, Belgium).

