The Georgia chapter of the American College of Physicians recently spoke to Martin Throne, M.D., a retired primary care physician, about his volunteer work at the Weinstein Hospice in Atlanta, Ga.

Tell us about what you do as a hospice volunteer?
About three years ago, I decided to do some volunteer work, and I chose the Weinstein Hospice. They had an extensive, day-long orientation, and after that, I was assigned two patients. Both patients I have been given had Alzheimer's disease. The first woman was in a nursing home, and my second patient was at his home, so I provided respite care to his wife. I visited every week for both patients and spent about an hour and a half each time. I would try to converse and engage them in conversation, and I also provided support to their families. Both patients passed away after visiting with them for about a year. The hospice asks that we keep in contact with the family for a little bit afterward to see how they are doing.

How do you think your years as a physician benefits you in volunteering in this capacity?
I have had to sort of distance myself from medical care. As a physician, I am interested in care, but they have a nurse visit the patients, check the vital signs, and set up weekly medications. In my practice, I had patients with Alzheimer's disease, and I used to visit nursing homes, so I had relevant experience, which helped to have some insights into the patients. Also, being a physician enables me to help advise the patient's family members on health care directives and help clarify issues regarding their medical care, even though I am divorced from providing any medical care.
Is there anything you learned in this role that you did not experience as a practicing physician?
I see the difficulties families experience when dealing with a family member with Alzheimer's disease differently. I see how difficult it is for them.

Would you recommend other physicians volunteer at a hospice?
I think physicians would probably want to be retired to do this. You are in a completely different role, and you must distance yourself from being a practicing physician. You must be ready to accept the other parts you are playing.

Volunteering with a hospice patient sounds like a big responsibility. What attracts you to this role?
First, I have the time to do it. But I also want to continue to contribute in some way and be involved with medicine. Even though it is not practicing medicine, I can help patients and their families.