THE POWER OF STORYTELLING: CONNECTION AND GROWTH THROUGH SCHWARTZ ROUNDS

Lara Johnson
The Sutherland Hospital - South Eastern Sydney Area Health District, NSW

KEYWORDS

Story, Schwartz Rounds, Connection, Personal growth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schwartz Rounds at Sutherland Hospital provide a safe, structured space for staff to reflect on the emotional and relational aspects of their work. Since launching in 2023, the program has grown steadily, with 12 sessions held in 2024–2025. Feedback highlights renewed compassion, strengthened connection, and deeper appreciation of the human experience in healthcare. As a palliative care clinician and three-time panellist, sharing stories has allowed me to honour patients, support colleagues, and experience significant personal growth. Storytelling continues to shape our practice, enhance wellbeing, and strengthen connection across the organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Schwartz Rounds are an internationally recognised health and wellbeing program designed to give healthcare staff a safe and supportive space to reflect on the social and emotional aspects of their work. The licensed program, funded by the NSW Ministry of Health, brings together staff from all disciplines to share experiences, explore the human side of healthcare, and strengthen compassion across teams.
Sutherland Hospital held its first Schwartz Round in November 2023. Since then, with strong support from the hospital executive and the Ministry of Health, the program has continued to grow and is embedded into practice at Sutherland. Staff from across the organisation—including Nursing, Medical, Allied Health, Administration, Hotel Services, and Security—have participated as panellists and attendees. Their diverse experiences have created rich, meaningful discussions that highlight the emotional realities of caring for patients and families.
Working in palliative care has given me many stories—some deeply sad, but many profoundly inspirational. Being a three-time panellist at Schwartz Rounds has allowed me to honour the patients I have cared for and learned from, as well as the incredible staff who have shaped my practice over the years. Sharing these stories has been a meaningful way to acknowledge their impact and keep their lessons alive within our workplace.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Schwartz Rounds at Sutherland averaged 52 staff each session
- Staff reporting renewed compassion, pride and deeper human connection
- Panellist stories strengthened reflection and emotional insight

METHODOLOGY/ PROCESS

Schwartz Rounds follow a structured model that provides healthcare staff with a safe and supportive space to reflect on the emotional and social aspects of their work. At Sutherland Hospital, the program is coordinated by a multidisciplinary Planning Committee, several of whom have completed formal facilitator training through the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare. This training ensures facilitators are equipped to guide reflective discussions, maintain psychological safety, and support staff as they share their experiences.

The Planning Committee selects themes for each Round, identifies panellists from across the hospital, and works closely with them to prepare their stories in a way that feels safe and supported. Each Round includes three panellists, who speak for approximately five minutes each. This is followed by an open discussion among attendees, with the aim not to solve problems or ask clinical questions, but to encourage others to share their own experiences related to the session's theme. After each Round, the committee reviews feedback and evaluates the session to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement, ensuring the program continues to evolve and meet the needs of staff.

RESULTS/ OUTCOMES

In 2024 and 2025, Sutherland Hospital held 12 Schwartz Rounds, with collected data showing an average attendance of 52 staff per session.

Feedback is also collected from each session and is overwhelming positive and includes comments such as -

'*Renewed my motivation to continue compassion and kindness in my work'*

'Made me grateful and proud to work in health'

'Deeper appreciation of human connection'

On a personal level I have been a panellist three times. Topics for those rounds were -

'Why I do what I do'

'A moment when I needed my team'

'The power of teamwork'

It was an honour to share my stories from working in a palliative care unit with a wider audience across the acute hospital. The positive feedback I received after each Round was invaluable, and many colleagues were inspired to share their own experiences with me in return. Yet the greatest impact was the personal growth that came from the process. Allowing myself to be vulnerable and speak openly about my work has helped me grow as both a clinician and a leader, deepening my confidence, empathy, and connection to others.

CONCLUSION

Schwartz Rounds have become an important and meaningful initiative within Sutherland Hospital, offering staff a safe space to reflect on the emotional and relational aspects of their work. The program has strengthened staff wellbeing, encouraged reflective dialogue, and created space to honour the experiences of those working in healthcare. Storytelling has been especially powerful—allowing staff to learn from one another, deepen insight, and carry forward the lessons gained through lived experience. I encourage all those who work in palliative care to pause and consider the countless people you have met over the years, and how deeply they have touched and shaped you.