

## Use of complementary therapies in nursing homes: Descriptive study

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Complementary therapies may have positive effect on residents in nursing homes. The aim of this research was to investigate what kind of complementary therapies are provided in Icelandic nursing homes and who are the providers. Also whether the nursing homes need assistance to support the use of such therapies.

**Method:** A questionnaire was mailed to all the nursing homes in Iceland (N = 59). Total of forty-five nursing homes replied or 76% response rate.

**Results:** Registered nurses and licenced practical did most of the planning and provision of complementary therapies. The most common therapies were: heat packs, physical exercise and massage. Managers would like to have more knowledge and support in providing complementary therapies.

**Conclusion:** The use of some complementary therapies is common in Icelandic nursing homes. More knowledge is needed to support the use of CT in Icelandic nursing homes.

### 1. Introduction

Individuals needing nursing home care have encountered many changes and losses in their lives although physical and cognitive disabilities may be at the forefront. Researchers have reported that the main predictors for nursing home placement are dementia, old age [1] functional impairment, myocardial infarction, living alone and polypharmacy [2]. Many nursing home residents are cognitively and physically disabled, in declining health, and living their last months and years of life. The high prevalence of behavioural symptoms among residents in Icelandic nursing homes (40%), despite extensive use of antipsychotic drugs (30%) [3], suggests that the residents' express their distress with inappropriate behaviour that needs addressing by other means than drug use. Expectations of quality of care in nursing homes have increased [4] and the need is increasing for knowledgeable staff to address residents' special needs and provide for their well-being. Social engagement and recreational activities are an important part of life and continue to be important in nursing homes. A recent study conducted by the Ministry of Welfare reports that nursing homes acknowledge the importance of stimulating residents' activity level at the same time as knowledge there is lacking of how to accomplish this [5].

Complementary therapies are defined by the NCCIH as: "non-mainstream practice used together with conventional medicine, it's considered complementary" [26]. Research has suggested that using complementary therapies (CT) in nursing homes may alleviate inappropriate behavioural symptoms [6]. Examples of CT are massage,

animal-assisted therapy, and aromatherapy. Studies have supported the use of animal-assisted therapy for patients with degenerative cognitive disorders. For patients with dementia, interacting with an animal may provide the individual with friendship and decrease loneliness as well as increase communication with other people [7]. Nurses and nursing assistants use massage to promote health and wellness in the elderly. They use it to increase circulation, relieve pain, induce sleep, reduce anxiety or depression, and improve quality of life people [8]. Aromatherapy has been an effective care modality for reducing insomnia and anxiety in nursing home residents [9].

A national survey showed that Icelanders visit CT providers to a considerable degree. About 32% of Icelandic adults, aged 18 to 75, had visited a provider of complementary therapies in the past 12 months. People aged 65 and older accounted for 24.4% of the visits [10]. No studies on nursing home residents in Iceland have investigated the effectiveness of CT. However, a recent study shows that nurses working at the largest hospital (NUHI) are integrating CT and healing practices more strongly into their work to manage symptoms and improve clinical outcomes. A survey within the NUHI shows that use of such therapies has increased about 20% since 2000 [11]. The most commonly used CT were massage and relaxation therapy. Appropriately, the survey results confirmed that trained nurses and nurse's aides are the most likely implementers of CT.

The increasing number of older adults in the population make effective and good quality nursing care for older adults crucial. The 59 nursing homes in Iceland are in rural areas as well as the capital area.

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Icelandic nursing homes provide extensive 24-h care. It includes assistance with the daily living activities, moving about, recreation, psychosocial care, room and board as well as medical care. However, it has not been researched what CT is used in Icelandic nursing homes. The aim of this study was to gather information about the kind of CT provided in Icelandic nursing homes, how they are organized and provided, as well as what specific assistance is needed in nursing homes to increase the use of CT. Research like this is needed to guide future progress in the care of older adults and residents in nursing homes. It is thus important for the future of nursing and health care.

The specific research questions asked were:

- 1 What complementary therapies (CT) do Icelandic nursing homes provide?
- 2 Who organises and provides CT?
- 3 Are CT's important in nursing homes, and is assistance needed to increase the use?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Selection and implementation

The authors constructed a questionnaire with 14 questions on the use of CT. During the process, they contacted five specialists in the care of the elderly to pilot test the questionnaire. This led to improvements and additional questions. To ask about the use of CT at each nursing home, the questionnaire included a list of possible CT and space for adding others, as needed. In part, we did this to ensure that the nursing homes would get a notion of what CT was. A questionnaire with 14 questions about the use of complementary therapies was mailed to all 59 nursing homes in February 2016. It was specified that nursing managers at each home should answer the questionnaire. After 2 weeks, a reminder was sent to increase the response rate.

### 2.2. Analysis

Descriptive statistics with SPSS 24.0 were used to analyse the data. The authors conducted the analysis in close cooperation. Excerpts from the answers to open questions were read and reread to get an overall impression of the topics that were most important.

### 2.3. Ethics

We followed the Helsinki Declaration's ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice [12]. The National Bioethics Committee, Iceland, (no. VSNb2015110004/0301) approved the study, and the study was registered with the Icelandic Data Protection Authority. All participation was voluntary, and the data were anonymous. By answering the questionnaire informed consent was signed. Taking part in the study involved no potential risk, and all data from each nursing home were confidential.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. What CT do Icelandic nursing homes provide?

Forty-five nursing homes replied (76% response rate) to the questionnaire. The four most common CT were heat packs ( $n = 44$ ; 98%), physical exercise ( $n = 44$ ; 98%) followed by massage for feet, hand or back ( $n = 40$ ; 89%) and touch ( $n = 33$ ; 73%). Fig. 1 lists 10 of the most common CT the nursing homes provide.

### 3.2. Who are CT planners and providers?

The professions that plan CT are mostly registered nurses ( $n = 36$ ; 80%), assistants ( $n = 29$ ; 64%) and physiotherapists ( $n = 29$ ; 64%).

Those who provide CT are mostly assistants ( $n = 38$ ; 84%), licenced practical nurses ( $n = 35$ ; 78%) and registered nurses ( $n = 34$ ; 76%) (see Fig. 2).

As part of tradition, family members and volunteers offer some assistance. Therefore it was asked whether they took part in planning or providing CT. Fig. 3 shows that their participation was very little. In comments made by the nursing managers it was reported that if they took part in CT it was mostly bringing animals and providing massage.

### 3.3. Are CT important in nursing homes, and is assistance needed to increase the use of them?

The findings show that nursing managers think it is very important to provide CT ( $n = 34$ ; 76%). Almost all nursing homes ( $n = 42$ ; 98%) indicated that they needed assistance to provide more CT. The questionnaire provided a list of suggestions and asked the nursing managers to mark those they thought would be useful. Furthermore, they could suggest other ideas. Fig. 4 shows that most of them wanted consultation on CT, courses and lectures. Many also favoured ideas from different nursing homes and learning from each other. When asked to describe what courses they would like, most of them mentioned relaxation, mindfulness, and meditation. There was also interest in yoga, massage and touch therapies.

### 3.4. Open questions

At the end of the questionnaire, nursing managers were asked if they wanted to add something. Almost all of them responded. Many said that they found the use of CT very positive and helpful in increasing well-being and decreasing the residents' pain. However, this applied to not only the residents but also the staff who felt they were doing something special for the residents. They thought it was very important to give each person a chance for personal service and help. Making this happen required more staff and knowledge. Some people mentioned the importance of hiring professionals to help and teach. Sharing ideas between nursing homes would also be helpful like the use of Facebook.

## 4. Discussion

The findings show that the most common CT were heat packs and physical exercise. Registered nurses, licenced practical nurses and assistants did most of the planning and provision of CT. Family members and volunteers provided little assistance with CT, mostly being present and bringing animals. CT were considered important services at the nursing homes. However, they needed additional support, such consultations, visits to other nursing homes to learn from them, and courses or lectures.

The finding that the most frequently used CT was heat packs is interesting. This therapy mostly provides comfort and easing of pain in muscles and is often used in physiotherapy. It is very easy to provide and has been shown to reduce pain. Although it may be not considered as complementary therapy it was decided to include it here as it is used as non-pharmacological therapy and was named by the nursing managers to be used as complementary therapy. This treatment is also provided by other staff and research has shown that 22% of registered nurses use hot and cold applications to manage pain [13]. Pain is a serious problem affecting nursing home residents' quality of life the prevalence of pain has been shown to be 40–60% [14]. There is a long tradition of using heat to manage pain. Research has shown its value in treating acute pain [15] as well as chronic pain [16]. Given the prevalence of pain in nursing homes, they need good pain management. As polypharmacy contributes to adverse effects in old people [17] the need is obvious for nonpharmacological pain management strategies, like CT.

Research has shown that physical exercise benefits nursing home

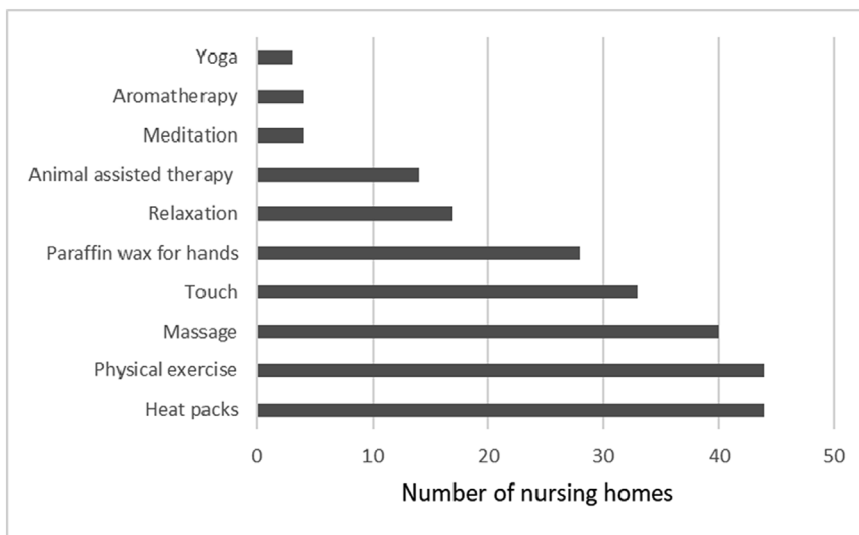


Fig. 1. The ten most common complementary therapies provided in Icelandic nursing homes.

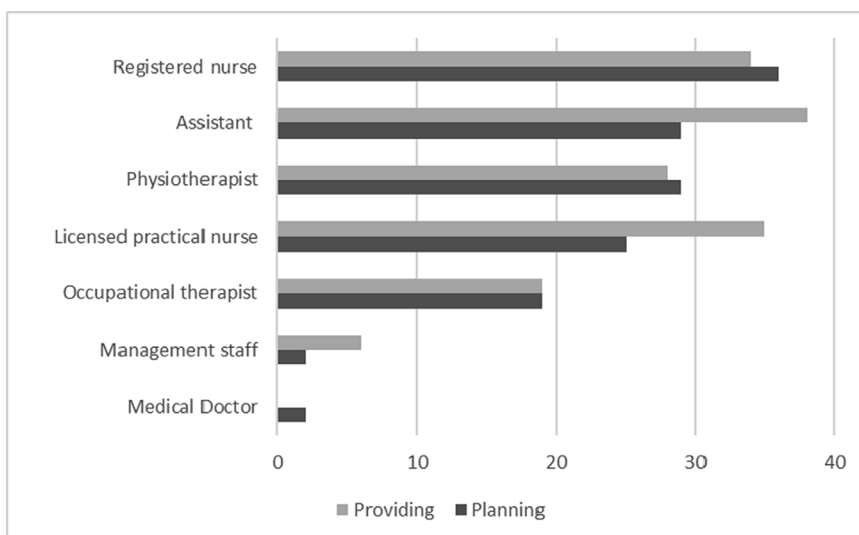


Fig. 2. Number of nursing homes where the listed professions plan or provide complementary therapies to residents.

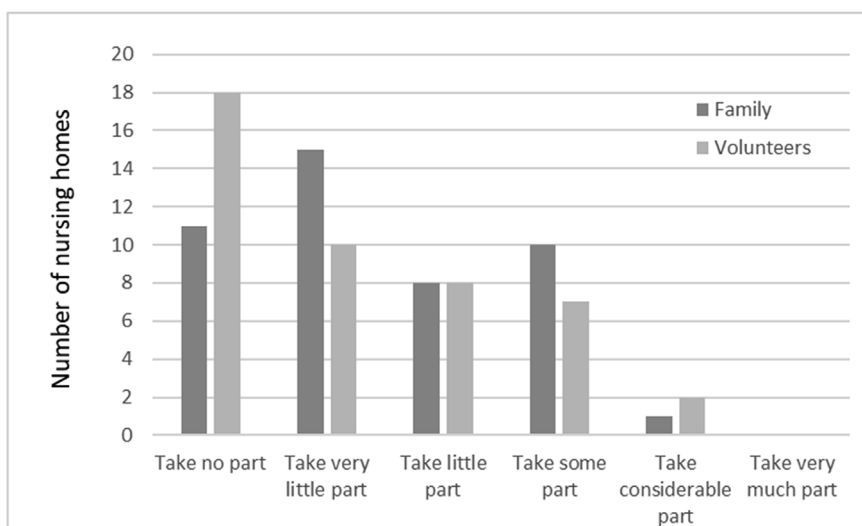


Fig. 3. The participation of family members and volunteers in providing CT in nursing homes.

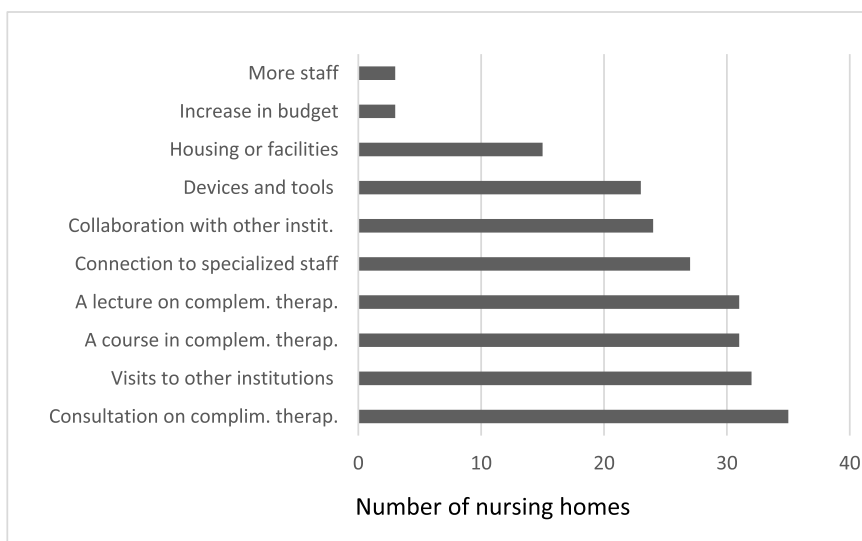


Fig. 4. Examples of support which the nursing homes would like to have in order to increase the use of CT.

residents, and this therapy is the second most used type of CT in Icelandic nursing homes. Most often physical exercise in nursing homes consists of group exercise, often while sitting in a chair with the main focus to maintain resident's functional ability [18]. Nursing home residents in Iceland have various health and functional problems, e.g., cognitive loss (39–71%), depression (16–31%) and need for assistance with daily living activities (32–58%) [19]. Exercise has proven beneficial to individuals with these disabilities. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis reported the benefits of exercising for nursing home residents with dementia. It positively affects agitation, mood, mobility and functioning [20]. Researchers have also pointed out the need for further rigorous research on the benefits of exercise [21].

The findings of this study show that nursing managers consider providing CT important. In addition, almost all nursing homes need support for providing it. This is of interest as it may be of value to both residents and staff to support nursing homes in providing CT on a wider scale. A recent study in Norway explored the experiences of registered nurses and licenced practical nurses with using CT in nursing homes [22]. The therapies used were aromatherapy, massage, music therapy and animal-assisted therapy. The nursing staff also thought that using CT was exciting and inspiring and made their daily work more rewarding. They experienced that the therapies had positive effects on external behaviour—for example, the use of animals—also using aromatherapy for anxiety and depression. Research has also shown that improvements in the workplace atmosphere are a factor important to the well-being of nurses and nurse assistants [23]. Recruitment and job satisfaction in nursing homes is of great importance as study has shown that adequate staffing levels may be linked to quality of care [24] and shortage of health care staff is one of the major challenges of the Icelandic health care system [25]. This report and study indicate that the recruitment and job satisfaction of nursing home staff is of great importance. We must consider this complicated issue if we are to increase CT therapies in Icelandic nursing homes for the benefit of residents and staff alike.

#### 4.1. Methodological considerations

The authors developed the questionnaire. They have extensive experience in both CT and care of the elderly. However, using questionnaires to collect data can have limitations. We could have asked more questions. It may well be that there is not consistency in what is considered complementary therapy. Some CT were listed for the nursing managers to think of while answering. Research like this is needed

to guide future progress in caring for older adults and residents at nursing homes. As such it is important for the future of nursing care. Knowledge generated by this study not only benefits Iceland but may also guide nursing home care in other countries.

#### 5. Conclusions

The study's purpose was to gain knowledge on the use of CT in Icelandic nursing homes, and how they organize and provide it. The results show that the use of CT is common in Icelandic nursing homes, and many health care professions provide them. Such therapies seem to play an important part in the services to improve the residents' sense of well-being. Most nursing home managers say they need more information, support and guidance to offer more CT. Further research should look into the effectiveness of individual CT regarding residents' health and wellness.

#### Conflicts of interest

All authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest in relation to study.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2018.05.006>.

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