

REVIEW OF ACCESS TO COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES IN NSW CANCER SERVICES

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are used widely in the general population. When people are diagnosed with cancer, they may continue or start to use complementary therapies either during or after their cancer treatment, often without the knowledge of health professionals.

The Definition

Cancer in Australia is conventionally treated by surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy and other drug therapy or combinations of these. Many people with cancer choose to use complementary therapies, although studies to evaluate their effectiveness may be limited.

Complementary therapies are a group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices and products used to diagnose, treat and/or prevent illness. However, the effectiveness and exact mechanism of such treatments may not have been scientifically proven. Complementary therapies are taken in conjunction with conventional treatments, while alternative therapies are used instead of conventional treatments.

Complementary therapies were grouped as:

- nutritional and dietary approaches
- herbal supplements
- mind-body therapies
- manipulative and body based therapies
- energy medicine
- traditional whole medicine systems.

Review of Access to Complementary Therapies in NSW Cancer Services

The review was conducted in mid-2005 to provide baseline data on the complementary therapies currently offered in cancer services in NSW.

Thirty-six health professionals from 32 cancer services participated in the survey. Each Area Health Service in NSW and private services were included. Thirty-one of the centres provided at least one complementary therapy.

Cancer services were most likely to offer complementary therapies that were mind and body based, were non-invasive, and which helped patients cope during treatment and recovery.

KEY FACTS

- 91% of cancer services provide counselling and supportive programs and 84% run support groups.
- 59% provide some form of relaxation or psycho-education program.
- Over 40% provide imagery/visualisation and another 31% offer meditation.
- Manipulative-based therapies were rarely offered. Massage was offered in 19% of services and yoga in 9%.
- Herbal approaches were occasionally provided, with 16% providing herbal teas and 9% aromatherapy.
- 34% of services employ a dietitian
- 9% provided vitamin or mineral supplements, non-evidenced based dietary approached, or nutritional supplements.
- No services provide energy medicine therapies or traditional whole medical systems (Chinese medicine, homeopathy).

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Respondents would like:

- information, guidelines and policies on the evidence for the benefits and harms of complementary therapies
- better access to nutrition and psycho-oncology
- to initiate massage, meditation, music therapy, relaxation, art therapy, and aromatherapy in cancer services.

If you would like more information on complementary therapies, please contact the Cancer Council NSW on 13 11 20.

KEY FACTS (cont...)

- Metropolitan services were more likely to provide meditation, psychotherapy and relaxation sessions than rural services.
- Participants were keen to increase the numbers and types of complementary therapies they offer.
- Participants saw their main role as supporting patients in making decisions about complementary therapies.
- Patients with private cover are advantaged in their ability to access complementary therapies in the private sector.
- Women with breast cancer have access to a greater number of supportive therapies, although there continues to be growth in programs for other cancers.