

Complementary Therapies

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Complementary Therapies Pub. No. 41021

ISBN 1-894557-50-6

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First Published June 1996 as *Complementary Therapies: What is your role?*

Reprinted January 2000 as *Providing Complementary Therapies: What is your role?* (ISBN 0-921127-79-0) and October 2000

Revised for Web June 2003, Reprinted January 2004, December 2005, May 2008. Updated June 2009.

Additional copies of this booklet may be obtained by contacting CNO's Customer Service Centre at 416 928-0900 or toll-free in Ontario at 1 800 387-5526.

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Ce fascicule existe en français sous le titre : *Les thérapies complémentaires*, n° 51021

Introduction

Complementary health-related therapies are enjoying growing popularity among the general public. An increasing number of nurses have been asking the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) whether it is appropriate for nurses¹ to provide complementary therapies, and what criteria exist to guide nurses in their use of these therapies.

What are complementary therapies?

Complementary therapies are used to complement conventional health care practices. They include a wide range of treatment modalities, such as herbal therapies and manual healing, such as reflexology and acupuncture. The therapies are not discipline-specific, and the knowledge required to provide them is not specific to nursing. They are considered mainstream by some members of the public and some health professionals, and extremely controversial by others.

Because some complementary therapies do not have a scientific basis, and it isn't always clear how they work, their use often raises more questions than answers. Providing some therapies could create ethical dilemmas for nurses, particularly if the nurse's values conflict with those of the client. This paper is designed to help nurses determine when and whether it is appropriate to incorporate complementary therapies into their nursing practice. It does not identify a "right" answer, because the decision to provide a complementary therapy depends on a number of factors.

Assumptions About Nursing Interventions and Complementary Therapies

Client choice and well-being

Nurses respect the ethical values of client choice and well-being. Clients have the right to make their own decisions regarding care and treatment. Nurses are partners in the decision-making process and are responsible for ensuring that clients have

the appropriate information to make an informed choice.

Promoting client well-being means facilitating a client's good health or welfare and preventing or removing harm. Nurses are responsible for assessing the appropriateness—including the potential benefit and harm—of all interventions before providing the intervention. In some instances, it can be difficult to decide what is good or beneficial. In situations where there is a difference of opinion between the nurse and the client, the nurse needs to explore the client's views as a starting point.

Clients may ask nurses to provide a variety of complementary therapies. Nurses are responsible for assessing the appropriateness of the complementary therapy; they must have sufficient knowledge of the action and effects of the therapy to assess the risks and benefits for the particular client. Nurses need to access available resources to obtain information about the particular intervention to determine appropriateness in the context of the situation. The client must have access to this information to make an informed choice. Consent from the client is required regardless if the therapy is requested by the client or proposed by a health practitioner.

In deciding whether to perform a complementary therapy, the nurse's personal values might conflict with those of the client. Some situations can cause conflict, uncertainty or distress for some nurses, yet be straightforward for others. Nurses should not try to resolve ethical dilemmas independently. Understanding values and discussing case situations with colleagues and health care team members will assist nurses in ethical decision-making.

In situations in which the client asks a nurse to perform an act that has an unknown risk, the nurse must refuse to follow the client's wishes if she/he believes it may cause harm. The nurse is expected to share her/his reasons for this decision with the client.

¹ In this document, *nurse* refers to Registered Practical Nurse (RPN), Registered Nurse (RN) and Nurse Practitioners (NP).

Scope of nursing practice

The *Nursing Act, 1991*, identifies nursing as “the promotion of health and the assessment of, the provision of care for, and the treatment of, health conditions by supportive, preventive, therapeutic, palliative and rehabilitative means to attain or maintain optimal function.” This statement describes in a general way what nurses do, and incorporates a wide range of activities and interventions. The scope of nursing activities will vary depending on the environment in which the nurse practises, and will be influenced by such variables as client status, resources and agency policy.

Before providing a particular intervention, it is important to determine that the intervention falls within the scope of nursing practice, and that it is an accepted intervention, within the nurse’s role, at the agency where the nurse is employed.

CNO views complementary therapies as adjuncts to care that may be offered in conjunction with, and not to the exclusion of, other approaches. It is important to consider how a particular intervention will enhance the overall care for the client. A nurse may propose the use of a complementary therapy to a client if she/he has the knowledge to believe that the treatment would benefit the client. This must be done in collaboration with other members of the health care team and be incorporated into the plan of care.

Nurses who provide complementary therapies in independent practice are responsible for ensuring that clients are aware of all treatment options, that she/he is not in conflict of interest and for referring to other health care professionals when appropriate.

Professional accountability

Professional accountability is an inherent part of assessing and determining whether a particular treatment is appropriate (as is providing the client with the necessary information to make an informed choice).

In providing care, nurses must understand their own professional accountability. Professional accountability means being responsible for one’s actions and accepting the consequences.

Accountability is demonstrated through one’s decision-making processes, competency and integrity. It is reflected in accurate documentation and in the nurse’s actions.

In deciding to provide a complementary therapy, nurses must understand they are accountable for determining the appropriateness of the therapy, given the client’s status, and for competently providing that therapy. Nurses function within recognized standards of practice, and the public expects that nurses will provide safe and ethical care.

Nurses’ Responsibilities in Providing a Complementary Therapy

The following describes nurses’ responsibilities in providing a complementary therapy. Nurses are expected to be competent in the care they provide and accountable for their actions.

Step 1

Is it appropriate to provide the complementary therapy?

1. Do I have the knowledge, skill and judgment to assess the appropriateness of providing this therapy for this particular client? Consider the following.
 - What is the client’s health status?
 - What are the available interventions?
2. Do I have enough information about this therapy to answer the following questions:
 - What is the anticipated effect of this therapy?
 - What are the potential benefits of this therapy?
 - What are the potential risks of this therapy?
 - What is the expected outcome of this therapy?
3. Is the client informed about this therapy?
 - The client must have access to the relevant information about the risks, benefits and effects of the treatment, and other available options, to make an informed choice.
 - Consent from the client is required regardless if the therapy is requested by the client or proposed by a health care practitioner.

4. Do I have the authority to perform this therapy?
 - Nurses have the authority to perform procedures that fall within one of the three controlled acts authorized to nursing, or procedures that are not considered controlled acts. When considering the appropriateness of performing an intervention, nurses should keep in mind the following factors:
 - not all procedures that may cause harm are included in the controlled acts; and
 - each nurse is accountable for her/his actions and for acting within the scope of nursing practice.

5. Has the complementary therapy been recognized as an acceptable intervention within my agency (if applicable)? Is the therapy incorporated into the client's plan of care?
 - Nursing and administrative authorities would make this decision. If the complementary therapy is not a recognized intervention, nurses may wish to advocate for it to be recognized.

6. Are there conflict-of-interest issues if I propose this therapy?
 - Nurses are accountable to address conflict-of-interest issues. See the College's *Ethics* and *Independent Practice* documents.

Step 2

Do I have the required knowledge, skill and judgment to provide this therapy safely and effectively?

- Nurses need the necessary assessment skills to carry out the ongoing assessment and evaluation of the effects of the therapy. The entire nursing process must be used as a basis for incorporating the complementary therapy into a plan of care.
- As stated in CNO's *Professional Standards, Revised 2002*, each nurse is accountable to the public and responsible for ensuring that her/his practice and conduct meet legislative requirements and the standards of the profession. The nurse demonstrates this by having the knowledge, skill and judgment needed to practise in her/his settings. Some therapies require technical skill. Nurses who provide such therapies must be competent in the technical aspects.

Step 3

Do I understand, and can I deal with, the possible outcomes of this therapy?

- Nurses must be able to evaluate the effect of the complementary therapy on the overall health status of the client, and to recognize when additional skill, knowledge and expertise are required.

Scenarios

These three scenarios demonstrate some of the challenges nurses face in determining their role in providing complementary therapies. As with any

ethical situation, finding a solution that is agreeable to the client and all care providers is not always easy. Nurses are encouraged to discuss issues with their colleagues.

Scenario 1

You are a visiting nurse providing palliative care. Your client has been told by the health care team that there are no more “curative” treatment options available to him, and the plan of treatment is to provide comfort and support. The client is having great difficulty accepting this. He has heard about an unconventional treatment involving IV infusion of ozone and is asking you to provide this treatment.

What should you do?

Discussion

The client is asking you to participate in an unconventional treatment. You have an obligation to explore with the client his understanding of the treatment and his reason for choosing it. It is important to seek guidance from your agency and colleagues, and as much information about the treatment as possible. If you are unable to obtain adequate information about this treatment to assess the risk and recognize that there may be a significant risk, you would determine that it is not appropriate to get involved in this treatment. You would then explain your decision to the client.

Scenario 2

You have completed Levels 1 and 2 of a therapeutic touch program. In the acute care setting where you work, you have identified some clients you think could really benefit from this intervention.

Is it acceptable for you to suggest it to them?

Discussion

You may propose to a client the use of therapeutic touch if you have the knowledge to believe that the treatment would benefit the client, and therapeutic touch has been recognized by the acute care agency

as an appropriate intervention. Consider the following questions:

- Is this an appropriate intervention for this client?
- Am I competent in the technique to provide therapeutic touch effectively?
- Has the client been fully informed about this intervention and consented to it?
- Is this intervention included as part of the recognized plan of care?
- Is therapeutic touch offered as an adjunct to other interventions?

If the agency has not determined the appropriateness of this intervention, then you may advocate to have it recognized.

Scenario 3

In the long-term care setting where you work, some of the residents are prescribed herbal remedies by a physician who practises Chinese medicine.

What are you accountable for in administering these substances?

Discussion

You must balance client choice with professional responsibility. At a minimum, you would need information about the purpose, action and anticipated effects of the substance to fulfil your professional responsibility to assess the risks and benefits of providing this treatment in relation to the health status of the client. You would also be responsible for evaluating the effects of the treatment. If you had access to sufficient information to meet this expectation, then you may agree to provide this treatment. One way to achieve this would be to arrange for a team conference with the physician to develop a plan of care related to the administration of the prescribed herbal substances.

Notes:



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