



# THE ATTITUDES OF PHYSICIANS, NURSES, PHYSICAL THERAPISTS, AND MIDWIVES TOWARD COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE FOR CHRONIC PAIN: A SURVEY AT AN ACADEMIC HOSPITAL

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**Objective:** To assess the attitudes of physicians, nurses, physical therapists, and midwives toward complementary medicine (CM) at a Swiss academic hospital and toward its use for treating chronic pain.

**Design:** The cross-sectional survey took place from October to December 2013.

**Setting:** An e-mail sent to 4925 healthcare professionals (1969 physicians, 2372 nurses, 145 physical therapists, and 111 midwives) working at Lausanne University Hospital, Switzerland, invited them to answer a web-based questionnaire.

**Results:** The questionnaire was answered by 1247 healthcare professionals (response rate: 25.3%). Of these, 96.1% strongly agreed or agreed that CM could be useful for the treatment of chronic pain, with more nurses (96.7%) and midwives (100%) than physicians (93.8%) agreeing that CM could be useful ( $P < .001$  for both comparisons). Women had more positive

attitude toward CM than men (97.8% versus 91.2%;  $P < .001$ ). Of the respondents, 96.9% were strongly in favor or in favor of offering CM, especially hypnosis (89.8%), osteopathy (85.5%), and acupuncture (83.4%), at the hospital for treating chronic pain. Respondents listed migraine (74.7%), tension headaches (70.6%), and low back pain (70.1%) as three main conditions for which they would refer patients for acupuncture. The three therapies with which respondents were the most unfamiliar were neuraltherapy (57.2%), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (54.1%), and biofeedback (51.9%). Over half of respondents, 58.3%, had never referred a patient to a CM practitioner. A total of 84.3% of the respondents felt that they lacked the knowledge to inform their patients about CM.

**Key words:** Complementary therapies, health knowledge, practice, attitude of health personnel, chronic pain

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## INTRODUCTION

Chronic pain is a major health issue that affects up to 20% of the European population.<sup>1</sup> Chronic pain is challenging to manage, and some patients experience difficulties with conventional therapies.<sup>2,3</sup> Accordingly, 52% of patients with

chronic pain report using complementary medicine (CM).<sup>2</sup> Notably, chronic pain is the most commonly reported condition for CM use.

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) defines CM as “a group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practices and products that is not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine.”<sup>4</sup> CM use has increased in recent decades in Europe and the United States.<sup>5-7</sup> At the Mayo Clinic, 44% of physicians would refer a patient to a CM practitioner if CM was available.<sup>8</sup> In another study, 53% of physicians stated that they would consider acupuncture for themselves if they had health problems in which acupuncture could be an alternative treatment.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, 38% of them recommended acupuncture to their migraine patients.

A study showed that many physical therapists (46.9%) frequently used acupuncture to treat low back pain.<sup>10</sup> They also believed that acupuncture, massage, osteopathy, chiropractic, and yoga were effective for the treatment of

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low back pain. A Swedish study at university hospitals found that significantly more physical therapists than physicians and nurses practiced CM ( $P < .001$ ).<sup>11</sup>

The aim of this survey was to evaluate the attitudes of physicians, nurses, physical therapists, and midwives at an academic center toward CM for the treatment of chronic pain and toward the potential use of CM. Health practitioners' opinions and attitudes toward a specific treatment have an effect on patient outcome.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, understanding and evaluating healthcare professionals' attitudes toward CM therapy is important. Moreover, few studies have evaluated the attitudes of health professionals toward CM at an academic center.

## METHODS

### Study Population and Setting

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among all physicians, nurses, physical therapists, and midwives working at Lausanne University Hospital, Switzerland. An invitation to complete an anonymous, web-based survey was e-mailed in October 2013 to 4925 healthcare professionals, including 1969 physicians, 2697 nurses, 148 physical therapists, and 111 midwives. A reminder was sent one month later. To facilitate recruitment, every fifth respondent was given a voucher for a local bookshop.

### Development of the Questionnaire

Our questionnaire was adapted from other surveys among healthcare professionals,<sup>8,13</sup> as none were found that specifically asked about attitudes toward CM for chronic pain. There were three parts to the questionnaire: sociodemographic data, attitude toward the introduction of CM at an academic center for the treatment of chronic pain, and general attitude toward CM. As it was inspired mainly by American questionnaires, we discussed how to adapt the questions to the reality of clinical practice and CM use in Europe. Many questions on our questionnaire came from English language questionnaires and the questionnaire we provided was in French; accordingly, we checked the correspondence of the two versions in both languages, with native French and English reviewers performing forward and backward translations. The questionnaire was pre-tested by 10 healthcare professionals to verify its quality, question formulation, and to make final corrections and adjustments. The final version included 32 closed-ended questions. Questions related to attitudes toward complementary medicine in chronic pain were rated using 5-point Likert-type scales. It took 20 min to fill in the questionnaire. The study was approved by the local ethics committee.

### Statistical Analysis

Associations between categorical variables were tested using chi-squared tests for contingency tables or Fisher's exact tests, depending on the table cell size. Associations between categorical qualitative nominal and ordinal variables were tested with Kruskal-Wallis tests. Associations between two ordinal variables were tested using Kendal's tau correlation

coefficients. The statistical analyses were performed using Stata software, version 13.1 (StataCorp LP, TX, USA).

## RESULTS

### Study Population

Of the 4925 professionals who were invited to complete the questionnaire, 1247 responded (response rate: 25.3%). Of the respondents, 320 were men (25.7%; response rate: 19.0%), 922 were women (73.9%; response rate: 28.4%), and 5 (0.4%) did not respond. The professions of the respondents were as follows: 256 physicians (20.8%; response rate: 13.0%), 879 nurses (71.0%; response rate: 35.6%), 68 physical therapists (5.5%; response rate: 46.0%), and 34 midwives (2.8%; response rate: 30.6%). Table 1 shows the following data for the respondents: gender, age, profession, main professional activity, and training in CM. The mean (standard deviation; SD) number of years of professional experience was  $13.3 \pm 9.9$ , and the mean number of years working at Lausanne University Hospital was  $8.9 \pm 8.1$  years. The number of professionals working directly with patients was 1166 (93.5%), and 948 (76.0%) respondents did work that was directly related to pain management.

Of the 1247 respondents, 196 (15.8%) were trained in a CM modality (26.5% of midwives, 20.6% of physical therapists, 16.8% of nurses, and 9.7% of physicians), with

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Survey Respondents ( $n = 1247$ )

Sociodemographic Characteristics	Number (%)
Gender	
Female	922 (73.9%)
Male	320 (25.7%)
NR <sup>a</sup>	5 (0.4%)
Age (years)	
$\leq 35$	357 (28.7%)
36–45	567 (45.7%)
46–55	223 (7.7%)
$\geq 56$	95 (18.0%)
NR <sup>a</sup>	5 (0.4%)
Profession	
Nurse	879 (71.0%), sex ratio (M/F) = 0.2
Physician	256 (20.8%), sex ratio (M/F) = 1.0
Physical therapist	68 (5.5%), sex ratio (M/F) = 0.5
Midwife	34 (2.8%), sex ratio (M/F) = 0.1
NR <sup>a</sup>	9 (0.7%)
Main activity	
Clinic	1072 (86.0%)
Management	129 (10.3%)
Research	46 (3.7%)
Training in practicing one or more CM	
No	1050 (84.2%)
Yes	196 (15.8%)

<sup>a</sup>NR, no response.

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