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## Special Article

## An International Definition for “Nursing Home”



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## A B S T R A C T

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There is much ambiguity regarding the term “nursing home” in the international literature. The definition of a nursing home and the type of assistance provided in a nursing home is quite varied by country. The International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics and AMDA foundation developed a survey to assist with an international consensus on the definition of “nursing home.”

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There is often confusion regarding the definition of the term “nursing home,” and what type of care is provided in a “nursing home.” The origin of the nursing home can be traced to the Byzantine empire when Emperor Constantine the Great and his mother, Helena, established nursing homes and infirmaries called “Gerocomeia” to provide care for the elderly.<sup>1</sup> These institutions often provided residential living quarters, food, and some medical care, and

were typically located near monasteries or churches. Throughout the centuries, nursing home care has evolved and the type and extent of care provided as well as the terms used to describe this care are quite diverse. A recent international survey found that physicians regularly visited nursing home residents in only 37% of the countries surveyed, and in only 5 countries was a physician considered to be medical director of the nursing home.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the survey revealed international differences in the terminology used to describe “nursing homes.” A search on the PubMed database in November 2014 identified 16,925 citations with the term “nursing home” appearing in the title. Although the vast majority of these articles were published from the United States and The Netherlands, [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of publications by country. To enable meaningful comparison of

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## Publications Containing "Nursing Home" in Title

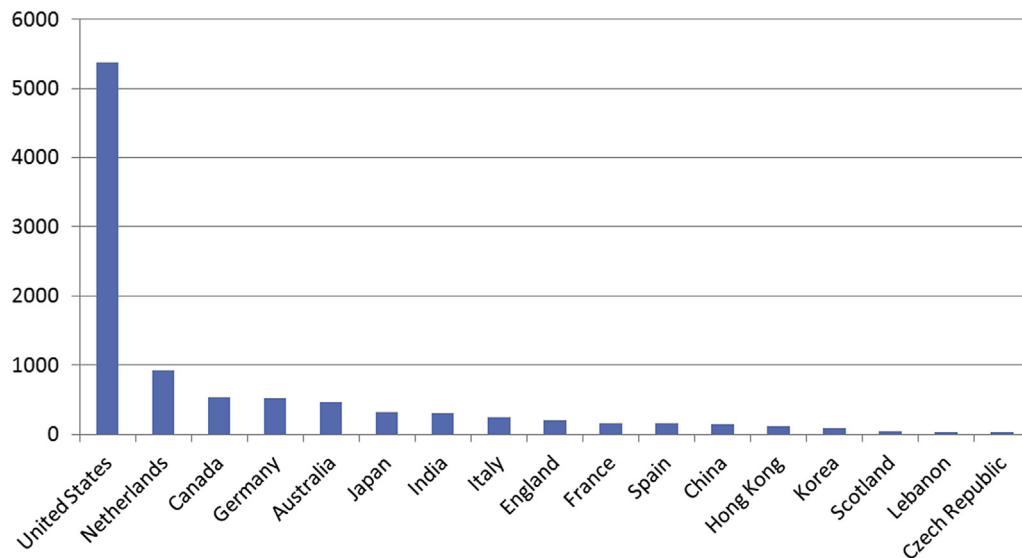


Fig. 1. Number of publications containing the term "nursing home" in the title by country.

nursing home studies, conduction of meta-analyses, and collaborative international research, it is important to clear some of the ambiguity surrounding the use of the term "nursing home" and to understand the similarities and differences within nursing home practice and nursing home populations. We contend that working toward conceptual and definitional clarity and consensus is an essential step in the development of high-quality evidence-based research and policy development. To assist with this consensus, we developed a brief, 3-item questionnaire. The first question was open-ended and asked very simply for the definition of a nursing home in the respondent's opinion, whereas the second question, a multiple-choice question, presented 8 terms and asked the respondent to choose any or all terms that refer to a nursing home in his or her country. A definition was included with each of these terms (see Table 1). For example, a skilled nursing facility was defined as a facility that provides extended medical care and intensive physical/occupational/speech therapy after acute illness and often lengthy hospitalization. Although each country provided all of these services, many were provided somewhere other than a nursing home. The third question asked which of the services in question 2 were provided in the hospital as opposed to a free-standing facility. The online survey was administered to an expert international panel and returns were received from 17 countries. The responses from each country surveyed are provided in Table 2. It should be acknowledged that our results are limited to

only 17 countries, with 1 respondent per country, so local differences in nursing home practice, if any, may not be accounted for.

Although the exact definition of a nursing home differs widely among countries, our survey revealed some common themes. First of all, it is important to distinguish between short-term care provided after an acute hospitalization, often called subacute care, post-acute care, or skilled nursing care, and care provided on a long-term basis. Subacute care includes access to intensive physical, occupational, and/or speech therapy with the goal of improving functional status after acute illness or hospitalization. In many countries, with the exception of the United States, this care is provided in a geriatric or cottage hospital or even during the hospitalization in a geriatric unit. In the United States and The Netherlands, subacute care or "rehabilitation" occurs either in a skilled nursing facility, or more commonly, in a ward of a long-term care facility that is specifically designated for this higher level of assistance. In contrast, long-term care occurs in a residential facility or care home and is primarily intended for those who require assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), and/or for those who have behavioral problems due to dementia.<sup>3</sup> The goals of long-term care are quite different than those in subacute care and focus on providing a supportive and a safe, homey environment while assisting the resident in maintaining functional status for as long as possible. As pointed out in previous studies, the availability of registered

**Table 1**  
Definition of Facilities Provided to Survey Respondents

	Definition
Subacute-care facility	Facility that provides extended medical care and intensive physical/occupational/speech therapy after acute illness and often lengthy hospitalization
Long-term care facility	Facility that provides room and board, as well as management of chronic medical conditions and 24-hour assistance with ADLs in patients who are physically and/or cognitively impaired
Rehabilitation hospital	Facility that focuses on physical/occupational/speech therapies to improve or restore functional capacity
Skilled nursing facility	Facility that provides extended medical care and intensive physical/occupational/speech therapy after acute illness and often lengthy hospitalization
Assisted living facility	Facility that provides room and board and varying degrees of assistance with management of medical conditions and with ADLs in patients who are physically and/or cognitively impaired
Care home	Facility that provides room and board and varying degrees of assistance with ADLs in patients who are physically and/or cognitively impaired. Typically, care is provided in smaller, homelike settings and medical professionals are not available on site
Geriatric hospital	Facility that delivers post-hospitalization care and rehabilitation for older individuals
Hospice home	Facility that provides care for patients at end of life

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