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# Evaluation of an art therapy pilot programme for patients in a day oncology unit

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## Abstract

Much has been published about the usefulness of art therapy with cancer patients, but little has been published within Australia, indicating the need for further research. The art therapy service discussed here was implemented at Mater Cancer Care Centre (MCCC) in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. An evaluation survey was completed by patients on perceived benefits and experiences of the service. Results indicated that 93 percent of patients felt art therapy helped them cope with treatment. All participants reported improved quality of life, and feedback was gained on referral pathways and strategies for programme improvements.

## Keywords

Art therapy, cancer, complementary therapy, and evaluation.

## Introduction

Quality of life and sense of well-being are impacted by the side effects of cancer treatments that involve chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. Both physical and emotional side effects can occur during treatment and may continue after active treatment has ceased, sometimes for months, or even indefinitely. In a study of 814 patients receiving chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy, 84 percent reported experiencing at least one adverse effect from the treatment. The most commonly reported adverse effect during treatment was fatigue (88 percent), followed by pain (48 percent), nausea/vomiting (48 percent), anxiety (46 percent) and insomnia (45 percent) (Henry et al., 2008).

While some side effects can be addressed through pharmacological methods, others have no effective treatment. Patients are turning to complementary therapies for symptom relief, a sense of hope, improved well-being and control (Humpel & Jones, 2006). Studies have found varying uses of complementary therapies, both globally and in Australia: from 50 to 75 percent among lung cancer patients (Cassileth et al.,

2007), and around 30 percent of adult cancer patients (Ernst, 1998; Pirri et al., 2013).

Integrative oncology involves a combination of complementary medicine (CM) and conventional treatments to give the best evidence-based care during the patient's course of treatment. Integrative oncology addresses the emotional and physical well-being of the patient. CM modalities employed include art therapy, music therapy, massage, acupuncture and reiki.

The benefits of art therapy have been addressed in a number of studies (Bar-Sela, Atid, Donos, Gabay & Epelbaum, 2007; Gabriel et al., 2001; Kayl & Meyer, 2006; Nainis et al., 2006). Art interventions can provide a positive effect on a person both physiologically and psychologically, whether that person is creating the artwork himself/herself or observing another person creating the artwork (Staricoff & Loppert, 2003). Art therapy is grounded in the belief that engaging in creative art-making will assist with developing a more integrated sense of self, increased self awareness, personal growth, and ability to process traumatic experiences.