

Towards the Integration of Complementary Approaches within Oncology and Palliative Care Services: A Mixed-Methods Study at Geneva University Hospitals

Category : Nursing, supportive & palliative care, rehabilitation & survivorship and integrative oncology

Introduction: The integration of complementary approaches within conventional medicine is rapidly expanding, giving rise to integrative medicine (IM). The prevalence of complementary medicine (CM) use among oncology and palliative care patients is increasing worldwide. At Geneva University Hospitals, the most recent study on this population dates back to 2008. This study provides an update in 2025, in the context of the creation of an in-hospital IM center.

Methods: A mixed-methods study combined a quantitative questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire assessed the prevalence, type, and reasons for CM use, while interviews explored patients' motivations, facilitators, and barriers. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately, then combined into a final analysis.

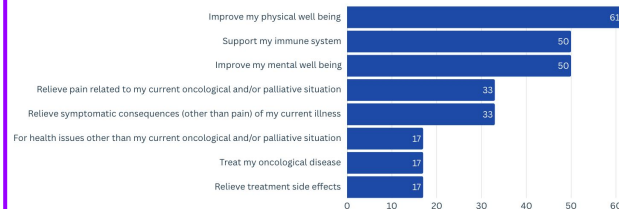
Qualitative results :

Complementary medicine as a means of empowerment (14/14)
"It needs 'to become a real project for the person, to feel that they can also take charge of their own healing, and that complementary medicines can provide them with tools to become an active participant.'"

Medical validation and collective storytelling as facilitators of access (12/14)
"[My doctor] understands very well; he was the one who suggested it to me at the beginning, and he himself practices meditation and sophrology, which gives me a lot of reassurance."

Structural and sociocultural barriers as obstacles to CM integration (12/14)
"If it could be presented, for example, to men who say 'I can't do that.' Because if it were part of the treatment, I think more men would benefit from it, as they would think 'this is something being offered to me alongside a treatment, and it's something I can allow myself to do'."

Quantitative results MOTIVES FOR THE USE OF CM



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Results: The questionnaire was distributed to 373 eligible patients. Among the 107 completed questionnaires, 83 were retained for analysis as they included data on CM use, which was the main focus of the study. Overall, 65% of respondents reported using CM alongside conventional treatment. The most frequently used practices were acupuncture (74.1%), homeopathy (40.7%), and hypnosis (40.7%). In the 14 interviews, CM use was perceived as a means of empowerment in coping with illness, fostering active participation in care (11/14) and a sense of self-reappropriation (11/14). Facilitators of CM use included recognition by conventional medicine (7/14), as well as information provided by HUG (12/14) or by peers (7/14). Reported barriers included reimbursement issues (12/14), lack of information (7/14), and limited integration into conventional care (6/14). The lack of knowledge about CM, reported by 42.9% of non-users, was echoed in the interviews, underscoring the need for accessible and well-structured patient information.

Conclusion: CM use is increasing among oncology and palliative care patients, motivated by the pursuit of well-being, autonomy, and medical recognition. However, it is hindered by cost, lack of information, and insufficient integration within conventional medicine. Patients express a clear need for a coordinated and accessible IM service. The planned IM center at HUG could address these expectations, provided that information sharing and care coordination are strengthened.