



Title	Effectiveness of Physical Therapy
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Aim

To review the current state of knowledge as regards the effectiveness of physical therapy in musculoskeletal disorders: electrotherapy, laser therapy, ultrasound therapy. Physiotherapists often use physical therapy in the restricted sense – ie, forms of treatment in which various types of apparatus are used to provide physical stimuli – particularly in treating musculoskeletal disorders. Although physical therapies are in widespread use, in recent years increasingly more experts have questioned the effectiveness of these therapies.

Conclusions and results

The Health Council has reviewed three systematic reviews (two of them were commissioned and supported by the Council) to establish what conclusions could be drawn regarding the effectiveness of electrotherapy, laser therapy, and ultrasound therapy. The review covered 169 RCTs. With few exceptions, the reviews present little or no evidence that the therapies concerned are effective in treating a wide range of conditions. The lack of convincing evidence contrasts sharply with the relatively large-scale and frequent use of these therapies in the Netherlands. Hence, widespread use in mainstream care is not justified.

Recommendations

The professional bodies for physiotherapy should initiate a policy to encourage members to change their procedures. These efforts should tie in with the quality improvement initiatives (eg, the formulation and revision of guidelines) that the professional bodies have been developing in recent years.

Methods

Review of systematic reviews of RCTs. Expert committee. Peer review of draft report.

Further research/reviews required

Further research is recommended for applications where slight evidence of effectiveness was found. These applica-

tions are:

1. Electrotherapy for arthrosis
2. Laser therapy for pain relief and the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, and
3. Ultrasound therapy for 'tennis elbow'.