Systematic review and economic modelling of the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of art therapy among people with non-psychotic mental health disorders

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Plain English summary

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We evaluated evidence for the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of art therapy for non-psychotic mental health disorders. The majority of mental health problems are non-psychotic (e.g. depression, anxiety and phobias). For some people, art therapy may be a more acceptable alternative form of psychological therapy than more standard forms of treatment, such as talking therapies.

The evidence is current to May 2013. Fifteen clinical trials (777 patients) assessed the effectiveness of art therapy. Art therapy was associated with positive changes to mental health symptoms compared with a control group in 10 out of the 15 studies. The control groups varied between trials. Four trials found some improvement but no difference between art therapy and the control group. One trial reported that outcomes were more favourable in the control group.

Twelve studies (188 service users and 16 service providers) assessed the acceptability and the potential benefits or harms of art therapy. Reported benefits of art therapy from service users included increased understanding of self and expression of feelings. Some areas of potential harm were also identified. The quality of all included studies was low to moderate.

A review to identify publications assessing the cost-effectiveness of art therapy was undertaken. One relevant case study, of a single patient, was identified. A new analysis was, therefore, conducted using data from three trials identified in the clinical review which found that art therapy is plausibly cost-effective compared with wait-list control. There were limitations with the evidence used to conduct this analysis so further investigation is needed before any final conclusions can be made.
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This report

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