

Hospital based Complementary Therapy Service

Recognising the importance of supporting patients' wellbeing as part of their clinical care, NHS Lothian Charity has funded the Complementary Therapy Service for inpatients and outpatients treated at the Edinburgh Cancer Centre (ECC) at the Western General Hospital (WGH) since 1997. The service has expanded since then and in 2025, approx. 3,400 hours of therapeutic support was delivered across 11 wards, funded by £37,800 from multiple Specific Funds. Patients who have received therapeutic support also kindly donate specifically to the service. The service now supports Medicine of the Elderly (MoE) and Stroke wards at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (RIE), and to patients in Palliative Care at St. John's Hospital (SJH), RIE and WGH.

Patients receiving care on the wards are offered therapeutic support in reclining chairs they are sitting in to get treatment or at the bedside. The trained therapists are guided by the individual needs and wishes of the patient mainly delivering gentle, light-touch therapies, including hand, foot, neck, and shoulder massage (over clothing). Depending on the setting, therapists can support different patients each week or support the same patients throughout longer hospital stays creating continuity of care and ongoing therapeutic support.

At WGH, therapeutic support is also delivered in a dedicated therapy room, providing cancer patients with a calm, comfortable and welcoming environment away from the clinical setting. Patients can access therapeutic support on a regular basis, typically through monthly appointments over an agreed period of time, with some patients accessing the service over a number of years, for example returning if they have a recurrence of their cancer. Patients can be referred by NHS Lothian staff and other cancer support organisations based on site, ensuring that patients can access therapeutic support at a time that best meets their individual needs.

5,000

therapeutic interventions are provided by the Service approx. per year (3,000 light touch massages and 2,000 other therapeutic supports such as aromatherapy and breathwork/relaxation techniques).



Complementary Therapy Team, 2026

Why complementary therapy?

Evidence demonstrates that massage and therapeutic touch can activate the body's relaxation response, reduce psychological distress, improve perceived wellbeing and enhance experience, making it a valuable tool for the general population who want to maintain and/or improve wellbeing. For people living with an illness or in hospital, Complementary Therapy is a valuable component of holistic, person-centred care. A growing body of research suggests that massage and therapeutic touch can reduce anxiety, promote relaxation, improve comfort and wellbeing, support pain management, and enhance the overall patient experience in hospital and outpatient settings. This report echoes some of the benefits outlined in the research.

 **Wonderful service. Not quite worth getting cancer for, but close!"**

Cancer patient

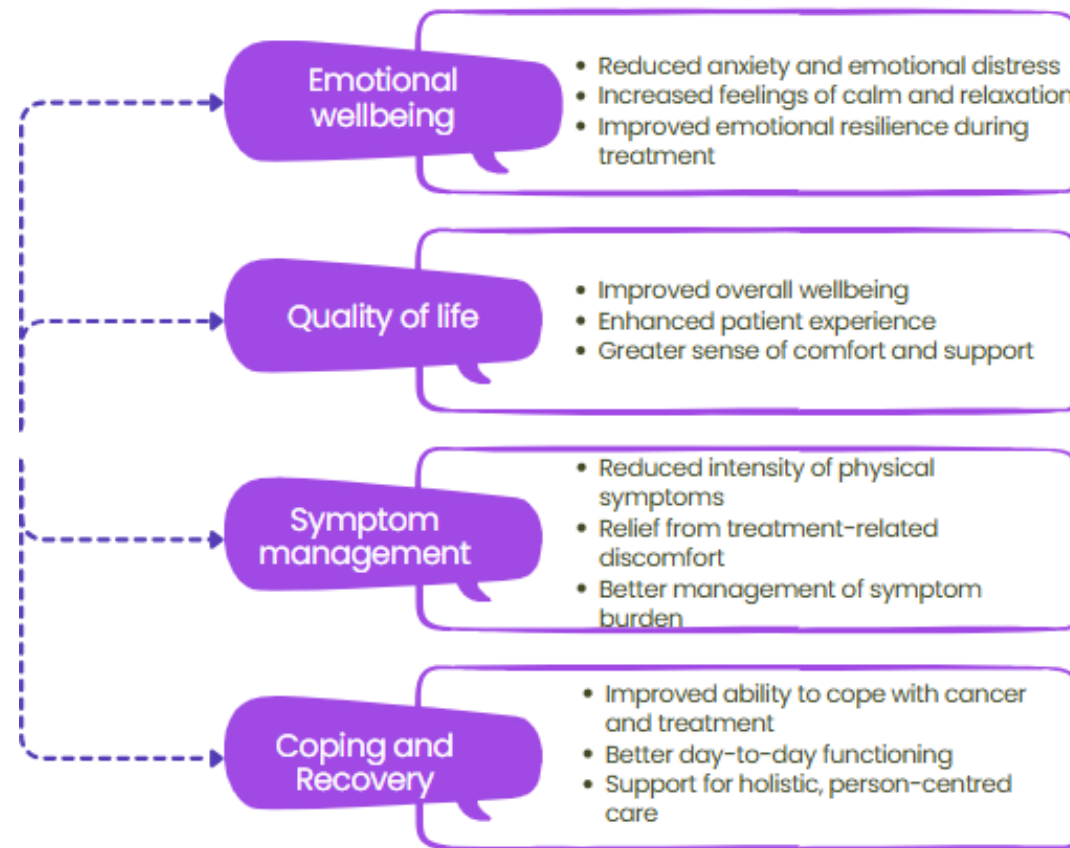
Spotlight on impact on cancer patients

The ECC supports around 7,000 inpatient admissions, 25,000 day-case treatments and 100,000 outpatient attendances each year making it one of the biggest services in NHS Lothian. On a monthly basis the Service delivers 60% of it's therapeutic support to cancer patients; in Ward 1, an outpatient oncology ward for patients with various types of cancer, Ward 7 and 8 for treatment of patients with hematological cancers and in the Teenage and Young Adult Cancer unit.

Therapists employed by the service undergo specialist oncology training enabling them to adapt treatments to individual needs, understand cancer pathways and treatments, and provide informed, evidence-based support in line with medical care. For patients, this means receiving safe, tailored therapeutic support from a therapist who understands the physical and emotional impact of cancer, helping to improve comfort, reduce anxiety and support wellbeing.



A 2025 systematic review found that massage therapy for cancer patients provides benefits beyond physical symptom relief. These improvements can contribute to a more positive patient experience and support holistic, person-centred care. Findings from the review found improvements as illustrated in the chart below.



Impacts shared by NHS Lothian cancer patients

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The surgery took away my cancer, the chemo blasted whatever was left, but without the complementary therapy I would still be lost, confused, angry and grief stricken."
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A huge thank you for the care you have already given me. Looking forward to my next session, as I sleep like a log afterwards!"
- 

Over time the therapy provided positive stimulation of blood flow to my legs and feet to counteract the enforced immobility of cancer treatment."
- 

When I was at the start of chemotherapy and feeling so low, the therapist came along and helped me feel better. By finding me and offering massage, this simple moment made such a difference. And each time we met, I was able to heal more. It was a big part of my healing."
- 

The amazing foot massage and cheerful chat made all the difference and I almost looked forward to coming in for my infusions."

Impact on mental and physical wellbeing

97%

agreed (68% strongly agreed)
the therapeutic support
**reduced feelings of
anxiety or stress they were
experiencing**

 The service has been invaluable in helping me address my anxiety following my cancer diagnosis."

 I enjoy the reduction to my anxiety and stress levels, especially at such a worrying time."

97%

agreed (72% strongly agreed)
the therapeutic support
improved their mood/outlook

 It helped me feel calm and peaceful. I feel stronger to confront my problems after therapy."

 It draws me into a different, more ordered mindset than focusing exclusively on medical interactions."

91%

strongly agreed the
therapeutic support
improved their ability to relax

 It made me feel very relaxed even an hour afterwards I could still feel the therapists hands on my feet."

 I had a fall before arriving and was quite shaken. I found the complementary therapy so relaxing and peaceful."

74%

agreed (54% strongly agreed)
the therapeutic support
reduced pain/discomfort

 I would like to say how much better and almost pain-free I felt after my session from the therapist today. Went into the therapy room limping in and came out walking tall."

 I went in with a stiff and painful neck which I could hardly move and was astonished at how it had eased after the session."

Other impacts on wellbeing

100%

agreed (88% strongly agreed)
the therapeutic support
**gave them a break from the
hospital's clinical routines**

 Very relaxing, nice way to
pass some time during
treatment which can be
tedious."

 While spending the day in
having chemo it has been a
real treat to have a foot
massage. It helps break up
the day and helps with any
stress I feel coming in for
treatment."

99%

agreed (84% strongly agreed)
the therapeutic support
**made me feel more human
and less like a patient**

 Very comforting and
warming. Everyone is so
scared to touch me so this
has been very comforting."

 Extremely relaxing and
sociable which at times can
be very hard to find. Lovely
to be remembered by the
therapist too."

96%

agreed the therapeutic
support (83% strongly agreed)
made them feel cared for

 It left me feeling like
walking on air and as if I was
cared for in a special way."

 I feel cared for. My feet
feel better than they have in
ages."

 Therapist was able to
understand how I feel and
why."

Provided a distraction

Complementary therapy helped patients
shift their focus away from their illness,
treatment, and the clinical environment,
which provides an emotional respite from
long days spent in hospitals receiving
treatments or in recovery.

 Made me happy and felt
really relaxed, lovely
distraction."

 Therapist is exceptionally
calming and is a good
distraction from chemo."

 A nice distraction during
a long day here in hospital."

Cancer case study: Feeling human again

Katarina was diagnosed with secondary cancer in 2023, having previously been treated for breast cancer in 2016. Following her diagnosis, she spent a lot of time attending the Edinburgh Cancer Centre at the WGH and Ward 1 for treatments and appointments. She shares: "I had often seen the Complementary Therapy Team making their way around the ward in their distinctive purple tunics, but it wasn't until one of the nurses suggested I try the service that I thought, "why not!". She shares the impact this had.

"I had experienced massage therapy before in commercial settings, but it was never quite the same. The therapists there didn't really understand what I was going through as someone living with cancer. What makes this service different is that the therapists are specially trained to work with oncology patients. They understand the impact of cancer, the treatments, the side-effects and the unique challenges we face.

"From my very first appointment in 2024, I knew I was in good hands. The therapist has what I can only describe as a magical touch. An hour with her gives my body exactly what it needs. She seems to instinctively know the right areas to focus on and adapts every session to how I am feeling that day. The physical benefits are wonderful, but for me the impact on my mental wellbeing has been just as significant.



I leave therapy sessions feeling lighter and more positive. Cancer can make life feel very bleak at times, but these sessions help lift that weight."



Gentle hand massage

"When I'm with the therapist, I feel safe. There are no interruptions, no procedures, no demands. It is the only time when I am truly able to switch off and relax completely. In fact, I often drift off to sleep during the session. I always feel the need to apologise afterwards for any snoring, but I think that's a sign of just how relaxed I become!

"What matters most to me about the service is that it helps me feel human again. When you are living with cancer, so much of your time is spent undergoing tests, treatments and examinations. You are constantly being poked and prodded, and it can sometimes feel as though you've become just another patient rather than a person.

"Seeing the same friendly, familiar face each time provides comfort, reassurance and continuity during an otherwise difficult and uncertain period. For a long time, coming into hospital wasn't a positive experience for me. It was somewhere I had to be rather than somewhere I wanted to be. However, since accessing the Complementary Therapy Service, I no longer dread my hospital visits in the same way."

Cancer case study: The same corridor, a different journey

Angie attended the Western General Hospital at the end of 2021 for a mammogram. She remembers walking down that long corridor to the Breast Cancer Unit never imagining that she would receive bad news. Yet just 2 hours later, she found herself walking out of the unit, back down that same corridor, after being told she had breast cancer.

Angie shares: "Any cancer diagnosis is frightening, but for me the distress was even greater. Only weeks earlier, my mum had passed away and cancer had already left a devastating mark on my family. Two of my brothers had died from cancer in their 30s and 40s. As I walked down that corridor, the only thought in my head was: "It's my turn." Angie shares how the complementary therapy sessions she received provided her with a lifeline.

"Once I had had time to absorb the diagnosis, I was able to ask questions and learn more about my treatment plan. I then started feel more in control. I told myself that this was something I could get through. Unfortunately, that feeling didn't last long. Just three and a half weeks later, my daughter, who was 31 and living in Kenya at the time, was also diagnosed with breast cancer.

"A difficult situation became even more complicated. My own cancer and treatment suddenly felt unimportant. All of my energy, concern and worry focused on her. Eventually she returned home but due to the nature of her cancer and the invasive treatments she required, she was very unwell for a long time.



The therapy room was a space where I could be still, quiet and peaceful, allowing both my body and mind to recover. Sometimes I would almost drift off to sleep, which felt like pure bliss after so many sleepless nights."



Therapy room, WGH

"Following my treatment, I had developed lymphoedema in my arm, so I was wary about trying any form of therapy. However, I was reassured that the therapists were specially trained to work with oncology patients and understood the unique symptoms and side-effects we face. From my very first appointment, I felt at ease. The therapist listened to me, understood my situation, and treated me with kindness, professionalism and respect. I quickly learned to trust her and felt completely safe in her care.

"The light-touch massage helped ease my physical discomfort and supported my recovery, but the emotional support was equally important. Having someone who genuinely listened, who cared, and who provided a confidential space where I could express my fears and worries without judgement helped me feel lighter. It helped calm my mind, enabled me to reconnect with myself and feel less alone.

"After seeing the therapist on, roughly, a monthly basis for 3 years, I walk down the same corridor that I walked on the day I received my diagnosis. It feels very different now. Today, I walk down that corridor knowing that I am alive. I am getting stronger. I am not what happened to me. I feel joy around me."

Therapist and Staff Perspectives on Impact

Moira, Therapist – Supporting patients through their cancer journey

Moira has worked in the Complementary Therapy Service since its inception in 1997, she delivers therapeutic support in the cancer wards and in the therapy room at WGH. She shares: “One of the greatest privileges of this role is supporting people throughout their cancer journey, often periodically over many years if their cancer recurs and they come back for additional treatment. Some patients I first met in 2010 still remember the care they received, highlighting the value of familiar faces and trusted relationships. Knowing someone understands their story helps patients feel safe, reassured and supported during some of the most challenging moments of their lives. Through gentle touch, listening and conversation, I see patients relax, share their concerns and I can signpost them to access any additional support they might need to cope with their illness. Taking this holistic approach means caring for the whole person, helping them feel heard, valued and supported throughout diagnosis, treatment and beyond.”

Rachel, Therapist – Bringing comfort to the hospital bedside

Rachel joined the Service in 2023 and delivers therapeutic support to patients in MoE and Stroke Wards and patients in Palliative Care at RIE. She shares: “Hospital can be an overwhelming and isolating place, particularly for patients I see that stay over long periods of time. Through gentle touch and compassionate presence at the bedside, I help people find moments of calm, comfort and connection. I often see visible changes during a session, with tense muscles relaxing, breathing becoming deeper and anxious expressions softening. Lots of patients fall asleep during or after treatment which gives the ward staff some respite, as patients can often be distressed or agitated. What makes this role so rewarding is witnessing the difference these small moments can make. In busy wards where rest can be hard to find, a gentle touch can communicate safety, compassion and dignity in ways that words cannot. It is a privilege to help people feel more at ease during some of the most difficult times in their lives.”

Impacts shared by NHS Lothian clinical staff

95%

of clinical staff agreed the
Complementary Therapy Service is
VERY BENEFICIAL to patients’
wellbeing

94%

of clinical staff agreed the
Complementary Therapy Service has
a POSITIVE IMPACT on their
daily work



This service has been hugely beneficial over the years and we see the therapists as part of our team within the ECC. The patients on our wards receive complementary therapy whilst having treatment which reduces stress and anxiety therefore reducing the need for some medications and input of other clinical staff or added nursing input.”

Senior Charge Nurse, Haematology



Some of the thank you cards from patients

Thanks to the Complementary Therapy Team for supporting this evaluation. Information about accessing the service can be found at each of the hospitals sites included in the report. NHS Lothian Charity also funds the Complementary Therapy Service for patients and their families in Ward 1 at East Lothian Community Hospital (ELCH) and for Palliative Care patients and their carers living in East Lothian. Read about the impact of these Services on the [NHS Lothian Charity Website](https://www.nhs.uk/lothian-charity).

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