

Effects of the Gastein Healing Gallery on physical functioning, activity and participation – results of qualitative interviews of 14 patients with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ankylosing spondylitis (AS) or fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS)

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Context

The Gastein Healing Gallery (GHG) (Pic 1 and 2) combines several treatment factors such as low level radon exposure, high humidity and mild hyperthermia in a moderate altitude above sea level. Patients regularly report marked clinical effects in a variety of domains, including symptoms, reduction of medication, physical functioning, and quality of life. Our objective was to assess the subjective effects of gallery sessions on physical functioning, activity and participation in a cohort of patients with RA, AS and FMS attending the GHG.

Methods

We conducted 14 qualitative interviews with patients regularly attending the GHG in Austria. Interviews for the study were open-ended and structured only to the extent of being guided by a set of predefined topics, including effects of the gallery stays on physical functioning, activity and participation. Conversations were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The content analysis was performed according to Mayring with the program MaxQDA. The creation of categories followed *both deductive and inductive* methods.



Pic 1: Gastein Healing Gallery Clinic.



Pic 2: Treatment area in the Gallery.

Results:

Fourteen patients were interviewed. Interviewees had a mean age of 58 years (SD 5,4), and 6 were female. Four patients each suffered from RA or AS and 6 patients from FMS. On average the patients had 11 stays with gallery sessions (min. 1 – 35 max.). Of the participants, 14%/64%/22% rated the gallery sessions as extremely/very/pretty successful. Four salient themes emerged from the analysis: 1) increase in muscular strength and endurance resulting in better ability to walk longer periods, to climb stairs and to walk downhill with less pain; 2) improvement in the ability to shop for groceries, to complete household chores, prepare meals and to garden, 3) working patients were able to reduce sick leaves, increase working hours and have a sense of reduced fatigue when working, 4) increase in the quantity of social life activities as well as a higher quality of those activities through a more harmonic interaction with social network members.

Conclusions:

In this qualitative study, patients across diagnostic groups, in their own words, report considerable improvements in several domains affected by their chronic disease. Regular therapeutic visits to the GHG led to an overall increase of muscular strength and endurance and, hence, to better physical functioning in different domains of daily life. Remarkably, participants who are still working indicated fewer sick leaves and the ability to work longer hours. Also, social activities changed for the better in terms of numbers and quality. To conclude, patients with RA, AS or FMS benefit significantly from regular stays in the GHG with respect to physical functioning, activity and participation.