



Therapeutic use of blankets,
vests and other weighted objects
in children, adolescents,
adults and seniors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

of the classic ETMI report

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ISSUE

Weighted equipment (in reference here to blankets, vests and other objects) is becoming increasingly accessible and available over the counter. Inappropriate use of such equipment, however, can present risks to the user's health and safety. Given the willingness of health professionals and caregivers to use weighted equipment in a therapeutic context, it has become necessary and timely to establish guidelines based on recent evidence.

CONTEXT

The CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale is currently concerned about the use of blankets, vests and other weighted objects, and its consequences on the health and safety of users across the network. Some of the measures to be taken regarding this equipment were published in Quebec several years ago in a report by the *Agence d'évaluation des technologies et des modes d'intervention en santé* (AETMIS, 2010) and more recently, in guidelines and practice guides from UK (NHS, 2023 and 2019; RCOT 2023) and Canada (CAMH, 2021; SSOT, 2019)¹. Nevertheless, professional and organizational issues remain, such as the professional resources empowered to assess and recommend such equipment, as well as the training requirements or decision-making tools needed.

In this context, the Direction des services multidisciplinaires (DSM) mandated the UETMISSS of CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale to update evidence and document the current use of blankets, vests and other weighted objects in the Quebec healthcare network. The development of recommendations is intended to support the production of a guideline for the therapeutic use of weighted equipment.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this project is to update the evidence concerning the effectiveness and safety of weighted equipment, as well as professional and organizational aspects related to this equipment.

¹NHS : National Health Service; RCOT : Royal College of Occupational Therapist CAMH : The Center for Addiction and Mental Health; SSOT : Saskatchewan Society of Occupational Therapists.

METHODOLOGY

Literature search strategies were developed and used to query the bibliographic databases CINHAL (EBSCO), Medline (OVID), PsychINFO (OVID) and Embase (OVID). Grey literature was searched using Google and Google Scholar, as well as the websites of various organizations likely to provide data related to the topic of interest. The literature search covers the period from January 2019 to April 2024.

Contextual data were compiled from clinico-administrative data (AH-223 form), interview with expert members of the *l'Ordre des Ergothérapeutes du Québec* (OEQ) and documents related to the *Code des professions du Québec*. Experiential data were collected through questionnaires sent to health professionals from the Centres intégrés de santé et de services sociaux (CISSS) de Chaudière-Appalaches, du Bas St-Laurent, de la Gaspésie and from the CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale et du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. All these data were triangulated with scientific evidence and recommendations were drawn up based on the findings and stakeholder consultation using an informal consensus method.

RESULTS

At the end of the selection process, 47 documents were retained, including 33 primary studies, two systematic reviews, two theses and 10 grey literature documents. Questionnaires were completed by 44 health professionals and managers from participating CISSSs and CIUSSSs.

FINDINGS

Effectiveness of weighted equipment

- The weighted blanket should improve sleep for children, adolescents, adults and seniors.
- The weighted blanket should reduce anxiety both in adults and seniors.

There is insufficient evidence regarding the effect of weighted blankets on anxiety in children and adolescents.

- The use of weighted blankets should improve daily or school activities in children and adolescents.

There is insufficient evidence regarding the effect of weighted blankets on daily activities in adults and seniors.

- The weighted blanket should improve mood in children, adolescents and adults.

There is insufficient evidence regarding the effect of weighted blankets on mood in seniors.

- The weighted blanket should improve the perception of general health and of quality of life in seniors.

There is insufficient evidence regarding the effect of weighted blankets on quality of life and health in children, adolescents and adults.

- The weighted blanket should improve the perception of certain types of pain in adults.

There is insufficient evidence regarding the effect of weighted blankets on pain in children, adolescents and seniors.

- The weighted vest would have no effect on behavior, engagement and school participation in both children and adolescents.

- Other weighted objects should reduce anxiety in adults.

There is no conclusive data on the effect of weighted objects on anxiety in children, adolescents and senior clientele.

Safety of weighted equipment

- The weighted blanket would be safe for short-term use by children, with special monitoring for children at risk (e.g. cardiac and orthopedic disorders, epilepsy).

No or few adverse events have been reported in the scientific literature for night-time use. Nevertheless, some discomfort may occur.

- The weighted blanket would be safe for adult use, provided that contraindications mentioned in guides and guidelines, the manufacturer's specifications and the user's preferences are respected, regardless of the duration of use.

- No serious adverse events have been reported following use of the weighted blanket in seniors, in compliance with the contraindications set out in the guides and guidelines and the manufacturer's specifications. Minor effects such as discomfort, heaviness or heat have been reported.

- The weighted vest is reported to be safe to wear but may cause undesirable effects in children when worn for long periods or over long distances.
- The use of small, weighted objects is reported to be safe for adults and is particularly promoted in geriatrics and for children, although guidelines mention certain risks. This aspect is poorly documented.

Professional and organizational aspects related to the use of weighted equipment

- The occupational therapist is a well-positioned professional when it comes to the use of weighted equipment. In Quebec and elsewhere, other qualified professionals, such as the attending physician, can assess the use of this type of equipment according to their fields of expertise and competence. An interdisciplinary approach is desirable.

Professionals are required to obtain free and informed user's consent before using weighted equipment and must take the user's preferences into consideration. They are also responsible for the user's safety and environment when using weighted equipment.

- Individual assessment and the implementation of a personalized intervention plan are encouraged to meet the user's needs.

Periodic review of the intervention plan is recommended. Assessment must consider the risks and contraindications, as well as the benefits for the weighted equipment users.

Assessments must consider (but not be limited to) contraindications, risks and benefits, as well as user's needs.

- Ongoing monitoring is recommended to adjust to user's needs and, if necessary, modify the way in which the weighted equipment is used.

The information gathered during follow-up should be communicated to health professionals.

- Free and informed consent of the user or his parents must be obtained before using weighted equipment. If a person is unable to give consent, other means must be used to identify wishes of the vulnerable client. Any sign of disagreement or refusal, verbal or non-verbal, must be respected.

- Although a professional training is recommended, there is no specific training for the use of weighted equipment.

Independent user of weighted equipment, as well as their relatives, must be trained for a proper use.

- Appropriate, up-to-date information on the risks associated with the use of weighted equipment must be provided to the user and recorded.

Health professionals have a role to play in raising awareness regarding the use of weighted equipments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and following consultation with stakeholders, the following recommendations have been made:

- The use of weighted blankets would be recommended to :

- Improve sleep in children, adolescents, adults and seniors;
- Reduce anxiety in both adults and seniors;
- Improve daily and school activities in both children and adolescents;
- Improve mood in children, adolescents and adults;
- Improve the perception of general health and of quality of life in seniors;
- Reduce the perception of various types of pain in adults;

provided that the rules of use and contraindications are respected, and that users give their consent and are informed of any adverse events that may occur.

- The use of small, weighted objects (e.g. plush toys, cushions) is recommended to reduce anxiety in adults.
- More studies on efficacy and safety are needed regarding the use of the vest and of small, weighted objects.
- A partnership between the responsible healthcare provider and an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary team remains possible and sometimes desirable for user's assessment, recommendation of the suitable weighted equipment and monitoring its use.

- The recommendation of weighted equipment should consider (among other elements):
 - Contraindications;
 - Risks and benefits;
 - User's needs;
 - User's consent and preferences;
 - The intervention environment.

- A personalized intervention plan should be drawn up and revised periodically or according to the user's needs.

- Training should be developed and made available to health professionals who recommend or use weighted equipment. The occupational therapist could be the designated person for this purpose. This training should cover at least, but not be limited to, the following aspects:
 - Guidelines and parameters for the use of weighted equipments;
 - Risks and benefits associated with the use of weighted equipments;
 - Contraindications to the use of weighted equipments;
 - Basics of sensory integration.

- Awareness-raising, education and training activities should be available in accessible language for users of weighted equipments and their relatives. These activities would aim to:
 - Inform public about the risks associated with the use of weighted equipments;
 - Raise awareness about the importance of obtaining consent from the person using the weighted equipment;
 - Train users and their relatives (family, caregivers) to the proper and safe use of weighted objects.

CONCLUSION

This work has enabled us to update the evidence on the therapeutic use of weighted equipment and to document current practices related to this equipment in Quebec, bringing back organizational and professional pertinent elements. The available evidence points to a certain effectiveness of weighted blankets for therapeutic applications in different populations (age groups).

Compliance with safety instructions for blankets, vests and other weighted objects is essential to avoid any risks of adverse events associated with this type of equipment. These include professional assessment of risks and contraindications, proper supervision of the use of weighted equipment, and consent from users or their relatives.

The therapeutic benefits demonstrated in the included studies point to a potential alternative non-pharmacological option in specific cases. However, professional judgement remains very important in making decisions about the use of this equipment. Field data documentation and clinical studies using robust designs, standardized tools and enough participants would be required to further document the effectiveness and safety of the various weighted devices, particularly for vulnerable populations or in specific contexts.

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