

The Role of Indonesian Dance as a Therapy Medium in Nursing Homes in Europe

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Abstract: Each country has nursing homes and elderly care facilities with different standards of practice, adapted to various factors including climate, anatomy, and culture. The varying needs of nursing homes mean that routine activities are held within the homes to improve the quality of life of the residents. The challenge is how to introduce Indonesian dance to gain recognition and approval from the various agencies overseeing nursing homes in Europe, as a regular weekly program. This study used a qualitative approach, including interviews with sports therapists and elderly residents, observations of routine activities held in several nursing homes and elderly care facilities, and organizing and participating in small Indonesian-themed events, including dance performances and workshops, as a movement experiment for the elderly. In addition to its range of movements supporting respiratory function, Indonesian dance has high aesthetic value, carries specific meanings that can build the audience's psychological well-being, and can promote relaxation, especially for residents of nursing homes. Creating dance movements as therapy, based on various Indonesian dances, can help improve the quality of life for seniors through regular exercise through dance.

Keywords: Indonesian dance therapy, nursing home therapy, senior exercise, Europe

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Introduction

Exercise is the practice of healthy physical movement for all age groups (Rumlah, 2022; Saputra, 2020; Alamsyah & Akkase, 2025; Kurnianto, 2015). In adults, exercise reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and depressive symptoms. Furthermore, high-intensity exercise is associated with a reduced risk of premature death. The benefits increase with increasing exercise intensity. Switching from physical inactivity to moderate-intensity activity provides the greatest relative health benefits.

In adults and older adults, 75 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week provides benefits, 150 minutes per week provides greater benefits, and 300 minutes or more provides even greater benefits. Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) have found beneficial effects from moderate- and high-intensity resistance and strength training two to five times per week (Kenniscentrumsportenbewegen.nl).

In older adults, exercise also reduces the risk of fractures (Ramadani, 2010; Wardhaniet al., 2025) and increases muscle strength and walking speed. These beneficial effects have been found with strength training two to three times per week and a combination of endurance, strength, and/or balance

training. Frequent exercise in older adults is also associated with a lower risk of physical disability, cognitive decline, and dementia.

In Europe, particularly in the Netherlands, there are Movement Training Guidelines for the Elderly that serve as training standards, accredited by the government, published for Physiotherapy. The organization, the Koninklijk Nederlands Genootschap voor Fysiotherapie, has the title *Beweeginterventie kwetsbare ouderen* (Movement Training Guidelines for Vulnerable Elderly). According to these guidelines, important components of physical function are muscle strength, endurance, balance, gait speed, and joint mobility. Elderly people are given a program to exercise for approximately 2.5 hours per week, spread across the time and day. Increasing physical activity is an important approach to addressing muscle loss and inactivity, as well as reducing the risk of loss of independence and reducing feelings of loneliness.

As the saying goes, "It's never too old to learn something new." According to ArieBoonsma, a trainer and movement therapist for the elderly in the Netherlands, a centenarian has a greater desire to try new things and is always curious. For brain scientists, making neurological connections by seeking stimulation, staying interested, eager to learn, connected, and alert is crucial for improving quality of life. Based on this statement, I had the idea to make Indonesian dance, which encompasses a variety of movements needed by the elderly, a regular program in nursing homes and the elderly in Europe, especially in the Netherlands. Indonesian dance has been introduced to nursing homes and the elderly in the Netherlands (and other European countries), but it is still a cultural introduction mission, not yet a regular program as a weekly movement therapy.

In addition to movement training, relaxation programs can support emotional awareness. Arts and cultural performances from various fields are very helpful in stimulating positive awareness in seniors, especially those with dementia. The format of the performances as part of the relaxation program can be tailored to the conditions and circumstances of each nursing home. In general, performances that provoke excessive emotion, such as dance performances that require tense music, are not permitted. Performances are only permitted with slow, quiet music. Rindik music is one example that is appropriate for the conditions of seniors in nursing homes.

Indonesian dance has many benefits for every individual, whether in the form of physical exercise or relaxation (Bisri, 2001; Wahyudi & Gunawan, 2020). In physical exercise, there are various kinds of processing, such as relaxing stiff muscles, body and brain coordination, detoxification processes through sweating, and pleasure. In relaxation, dance performances can help regulate emotions in the elderly. Not only do performances display aesthetics, but they also contain values and meanings, especially dance dramas. Of course, the material and elements included must be adjusted to the conditions of the elderly.

Based on this background, this paper aims to establish a significant role for Indonesian dance in the physical exercise of the elderly by recognizing

Indonesian dance in routine exercise programs in nursing homes, not just once a year.

Methodology

To determine whether Indonesian dance can meet the physical exercise standards implemented in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands, research on health standards for the elderly and conducting trials is necessary. The research was conducted using qualitative methods, including interviews with elderly nursing home residents, interviews with physical therapy experts, and dance movement trials in accordance with health guidelines for the elderly. The trials included movement and breathing exercises, accompanied by Balinese or Javanese gamelan music and other calming Indonesian music. The trials incorporated movement exercises typically performed by the elderly in routine physiotherapy training into dance movements. For example, the ball-throwing movement resembles the "ngarojeng" movement in Betawi dance.

Dance and music performances evoke joy, as well as short dance dramas with positive themes. The performances are geared toward nursing homes and dementia departments, for relaxation and emotional therapy.

Results and Discussion

To measure the well-being of the elderly, it is necessary to observe each individual. Initially, interviews are conducted to determine each elderly person's condition, including discussions about emotions, health complaints, and expectations. Interviews are intended solely for initial information gathering, not as a medical intervention. Interviews with elderly individuals should be conducted in an informal and relaxed setting. According to SarkaBratuskova, a motor therapist for children with special needs and the elderly, she concluded that elderly individuals in nursing homes need more conversations about their past lives and their current surroundings. For them, having a friend to talk to over coffee is a very enjoyable experience. As they talk, their motor skills and breathing are assessed. From this, it can be determined which class they should be placed in within the sports group.

According to Myra Versteeg, a massage therapist and sports therapist, warming up for seniors can be categorized based on their physical needs. It typically begins with breathing exercises, followed by chair Yoga. For those not using a Yoga chair, warming up can be done standing. Myra focuses on kinesiology. Kinesiology is the study of movement or the science that discusses the motor functions of the human body (Mangoensong & Yanuartuti, 2000; Abdurachman et al., 2016; Hartono & Rosyida, 2020).

Kinesiology is suitable for everyone, from children to the elderly. This method aims to help people feel better about themselves, so they can develop according to their individual desires. No medical treatment is performed, and a therapist is not a medical professional. A kinesiology therapist works based on holistic health, namely structure, biochemistry, and spirit. Related sides of the triangle, such as low back pain, can be caused by poor bowel function.

Similarly, emotional tension can cause neck muscle tension, which leads to headaches and dizziness.

Kinesiology assumes that the body is designed to heal itself. Things like stress, blocked emotions, poor posture, and lack of movement can cause energy imbalances. Kinesiology therapy is a regular healing process, without any medical treatment whatsoever (Kerkdijk & Rijntjes, 2025: 4, 5; Holl, 2025: 135).

Based on Myra's statement, Indonesian dance movements, combined with traditional music, can be practiced regularly by the elderly and meet the requirements of the kinesiology healing process. Smooth yet elegant movements, combined with regulated breathing, while listening to gamelan or other traditional music, can reduce excessive emotions that cause stress and muscle tension.

An interview with Mrs. Janine Looijen, a resident of a nursing home in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, revealed that she truly enjoyed Indonesian dance performances. According to Mrs. Janine, the dancers pay close attention to the beauty of the costumes, which match the dance movements, as well as the music. When Mrs. Janine tried Indonesian dance in a workshop, she wanted to continue dancing regularly. After trying it out privately five times with Nova, the Indonesian dance movements made her feel happy and addicted. She is 80 years old and obese, and often finds it difficult to walk without a walker. Over time, she has taken better care of herself by consuming low-calorie foods and drinks, which ultimately helped her lose weight. With a regular exercise routine at the nursing home, plus private Indonesian dance lessons, she has become more confident walking. The dances taught to Mrs. Janine are Betawi-based dances, featuring the songs Gambang Kromong and Ondel-Ondel. Betawi dance movements are very easy and adapted to the body and condition. If Ms. Janine had continued these dance lessons for a longer period, she'd likely have been even more beneficial.

Grouping of Sports Based on Motor Skills

The well-being and conditions of each elderly individual vary greatly. Elderly individuals in nursing homes range in age from 65 to 100 (and beyond). Conditions are not compared based on age, but rather on fitness and motor skills. Sometimes a 75-year-old is fitter than a 65-year-old. This also depends on quality of life, such as whether they smoke or have smoked, whether they consume healthy foods, whether they drink alcohol, or other life factors such as stress and trauma. Groups are divided into wheelchair-bound and wheelchair-bound groups, and also based on whether they need standing stability or the need to use assistive devices such as canes to stand and walk.

First introduction to Indonesian Dance for the Elderly

The first step in the therapy process for the elderly is a dance performance and workshop, which usually includes a lecture, providing information about Indonesian culture and explanations of the dances. In Dutch culture, information and an introduction to a new activity are crucial. Whether it's

Indonesian dance, an explanation of the various types of regional dances, the regions covered, and most importantly, the location of Indonesia itself. Not only dance, but also music needs to be explained, whether it's gamelan, sasando, sape, or angklung. A small portion of the Dutch population already has some knowledge of Indonesia and its culture, based on history from the Dutch East Indies colonial period, especially the elderly who had ties to the Dutch East Indies at that time. Most others assume Indonesian dance is from Bali and Java, unaware that Indonesia is vast and consists of various islands with their own cultures.



[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 1. The first approach is to provide information about Indonesian dance and culture



[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 2. Be a listener to the elderly regarding their stories about their knowledge of Indonesia, answer their questions about Indonesian culture, especially in the field of dance arts



[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 3. Providing Indonesian dance performances as an introduction process and relaxation therapy for residents of nursing homes and the elderly



[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 4. Providing dance workshops and inviting the elderly to dance together as a bridge to get their interest in exercising through dancing Indonesian dances



[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 5. Taking photos with the seniors after the performances and workshops is a valuable memory and moment for them, and it will become a positive topic of conversation. For example, when they have lunch together later, it will always be a topic of conversation among the seniors, the administrators, and their families

Indonesian dances are incredibly diverse, spanning the archipelago from Sabang to Merauke. The dances suited to the motor skills of seniors are gentle and meaningful, but that doesn't mean that cheerful and energetic dances are excluded.

Balinese Dance

Balinese dance is inherently challenging due to its rigorous body movements and the need for strong stamina. However, Balinese dance features a regular breathing pattern that balances its movements. While this is rare in terms of ease, it can be adapted to any age. For example, in the Janger dance, the agem moves right and left, with one arm extended straight toward the knee, while the other is placed on the waist. The body swings to the right and left in unison with the head. The props used are Balinese fans, which are also spun according to one's ability. This example of a "ulap-ulap" movement can also be performed in a wheelchair. While it may require a little effort when lifting the arms, it is also part of a sporting movement, like raising the arms up and down. Other movements that are easy to adapt to the elderly include "ngegol," a slow, hip-moving dance move; "jeriring," a finger-moving movement; and "ukel," a circle-making movement with the fingers and wrists.



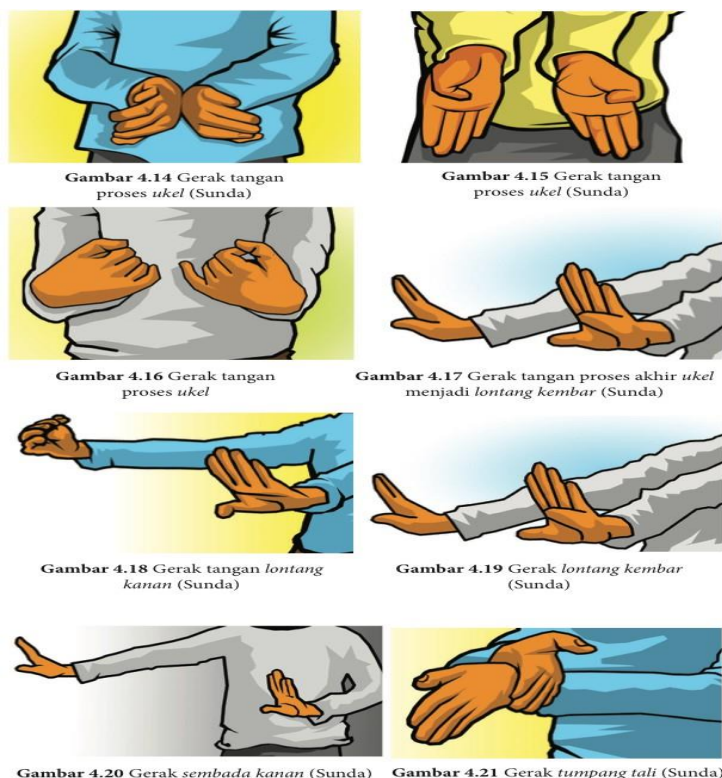
[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 6. Swinging movements of the body left and right, with hands on the waist and knees, in a sitting position (in a wheelchair for the elderly). Elderly men place their hands on their waists and also move left and right

Finger and Hand Movements in West Javanese Dance

Finger and hand movements can improve hand motor skills and reduce stiffness if practiced regularly every day. Hand and finger exercises can improve blood circulation and warm the hands, as well as strengthen the hand muscles, lymphatic system, and chest. Finger and hand movements are essential for those suffering from rheumatism. Movement is beneficial for the body's waste disposal system (Rohnfeld, 2024: 53).

In Indonesian dance, particularly Javanese dance, hand and finger movements are crucial. These movements complement the beauty of the dance process through the body's movements, making it visually appealing. Some examples of hand movements that seniors can perform are shown in Figure 7.



[Source: Nova, 2025]

Figure 7. Some examples of finger and hand movements in West Javanese dance, according to the book "SeniBudaya-StudidanPengajar" (2017)

Dynamic Movements in Creative, Cheerful Dances

This doesn't mean that all dances suitable for the elderly are very soft and graceful. However, depending on their physical fitness, seniors can also move their bodies more dynamically with cheerful, slightly faster movements. Movements such as lifting the legs and knees, or jumping, or spinning. Movements like rotating the hips will promote relaxation in the pelvic area. This movement is commonly found in dances from Eastern Indonesia.

Line Dance Movements such as Poco-poco

This marching dance emphasizes foot coordination, usually performed in groups. Through synchronized movements, the elderly are motivated to think more enthusiastically and fight dementia. By marching, the elderly become more attentive to one another and strive to match their movements, fostering a sense of shared understanding and emotional connection. The dance is accompanied by upbeat music, such as YopieLatul's Poco-Poco.

Another movement that can be done is mouth movements and sounds that Europeans find incomprehensible, such as those seen in the Balinese Kecak dance. The kecak sounds, which seem meaningless and often nonsensical, can actually inspire enthusiasm and relaxation, especially when performed in a group. Making seemingly nonsensical sounds, based on a 4,500-year-old healing process in Chinese Taoism, believes the tongue is the seat of the inner

speech center. This method is good for the brain; making nonsensical sounds simultaneously relaxes the tongue and brain (Holl, 2025: 54).

Music Selection

Music is the art of rhythmic combinations of notes, both vocal and instrumental, encompassing melody and harmony as an expression of all the beautiful human feelings we seek to express, especially the emotional aspect. Music can broaden knowledge and perspective, as well as provide insight into many things beyond music itself, such as recognizing other dimensions beyond reality that have previously been hidden.

Music can balance the left and right brain which means balancing the development of intellectual and emotional aspects (Halimah, 2016; Raharjo, 2007; Avandra&Mayar, 2023). Music as an important thing in a therapy process, will accompany the dance as a spark in the wirasa and wirama of the elderly when they move to dance. The elderly need positive energy obtained from music, not only balancing emotions, from traditional Indonesian music, the elderly gain new knowledge from other worlds, such as the world of traditional Indonesian music. An example, through the strains of rindik music or Balinese gamelan slow beats, the elderly who previously did not know Indonesian music will realize that traditional music can raise their spirits in moving their bodies through dancing Indonesian dances.

Another traditional music is Central Javanese music, known for its slow, earthy rhythms. Javanese gamelan music can reduce high emotions in the elderly, which can negatively impact their health. Likewise, slow Central Javanese dance movements, such as the classical Gambyong dance, can be incorporated into movement therapy.

Examples of dance movements, not all slow, gamelan-inspired music can be incorporated solely into movement. However, upbeat music like Poco-poco by YopieLatul and GemuFamire by Nyong Franco can lift the spirits of the elderly. Essentially, music can be chosen from a variety of instruments, including the talempong from Sumatra, the sape from Kalimantan, the Sundanese flute, the ukulele, the sasando from Flores/Eastern Indonesia, and of course, gamelan, among many other traditional Indonesian music. Another example of music suitable for movement for the elderly is GendingSriwijaya from Palembang, South Sumatera.

Conclusion

Indonesian dance, with its diverse movements, native to different regions of Indonesia, can significantly aid relaxation and improve the quality of life for the elderly. Due to the diverse range of activities required by the elderly in their daily lives, whether for physical exercise, mental training, or relaxation, Indonesian dance is highly valued and believed to aid non-medical healing.

With a wide variety of exercise activities, such as chair Yoga, senior gymnastics, Tai Chi, Yoga, and other sports, Indonesian dance can be further explored as a routine activity for the elderly in nursing homes in Europe. These include not only regular dance performances but also physical exercise through

traditional dances, creative dances, and line dancing to Indonesian songs. The variety of dances and music implemented for the elderly can be tailored to the needs of nursing home organizations and the needs of each group of elderly. From easy to difficult levels, Indonesian dance movements can contribute to processes that benefit the health of the elderly.

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