



Should Doctors Prescribe Homeopathy

Willow Morningsky

Homeopathy--quackery or a key to the spiritual health? Homeopathy has received criticism time and again for it being not scientific. Homeopaths insist their remedies have healing powers; scientists say there's not, but the question arises here, when we are treating the vital force that is indeed very spiritual or immaterial and not a mechanical science how chemistry could judge the merits of a spiritual medicine.

In this article author analyses the approach and the importance of the homeopathic system of medicine tried to put some lights on this age old debate on Homeopathy.

Those who blindly oppose homeopathy still does not understand that it is physics, and not chemistry, that homeopathy functions under. Homeopathy can make no sense in a chemist's view of the world. However a synthetic chemistry approach to symptoms control can never lead to a cure. This means synthetic chemistry(drugs) are wonderful for creating long term business, and increasing illness in ways that need further treatment.

British Medical Journal (BMJ) recently hosted a debate on Homeopathy. It featured Dr. Peter Fisher (the medical director of the Royal London Hospital for Integrative Medicine & the Physician to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II) in favour, while Dr. Edzard Ernst (a leading antagonist to homeopathy) against and homeopathy won! Not only did Dr. Fisher refer to numerous studies published in major medical journals, but he also referenced the most recent studies. In contrast, Dr. Ernst primarily referred to his own writings, all of which are extremely biased, and then, he asserted that homeopathic medicines are "devoid of molecules," thereby verifying that he is purposefully mis-informing people because he clearly knows about the good research that confirms the existence of nanodoses of medicines in homeopathic remedies!

Ariel Fenster, a professor of chemistry and founding member of the Office for Science & Society at McGill University says homeopathic remedies are so diluted that they rarely include a single molecule of the original substance, they are not medicines, homeopathic products should no longer be licensed by the government Fenster continued. However, worldwide people continue their long and intense love affair with homeopathy and are convinced that it helps them.

Discussion

Should doctors recommend homeopathy?

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Peter Fisher criticises the methods of a recent review that found no evidence to support homeopathy. But inconclusive evidence, lack of rational explanation, and questions about safety make Edzard Ernst question Europe's €1bn annual spend on

EDITORIAL

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such remedies.

Yes—Peter Fisher

Discussion

Of all the major forms of complementary medicine, homeopathy is the most misunderstood. Based on the concept of “treating like with like,” homeopathy originated with the German physician Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843). But similar ideas are found in the Hippocratic Corpus, in the work of Paracelsus, and in the medical traditions of several Asian countries.

Homeopathy is part of a family of toxicological and pharmacological phenomena that are attracting growing interest, characterised by secondary, reverse, or paradoxical reactions to drugs or toxins as a function of dose or time or both. These include hormesis (the paradoxical, stimulatory, or beneficial effect of low doses of toxins), paradoxical pharmacology, and rebound effects.

The controversial element of homeopathy is that some medicines are highly dilute, including “ultra-molecular” dilutions, in which it is highly unlikely that any of the original material is present. This is a major scientific concern and the source of the view that homeopathy “doesn’t work because it can’t work.”

However, recent *in vitro* research shows repeatable effects (for instance, inhibition of basophil degranulation by highly dilute histamine [1]) while basic physical research shows that the homeopathic manufacturing process changes the structure of the diluent, including the formation of nanoparticles of silica and gas.[2] The physical research is of little clinical relevance but provides a possible mechanism of action for the controversial high dilutions.

Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

A recent review by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council concluded that “there are no health conditions for which there is reliable evidence that homeopathy is effective.”[3] But this report used unusual methods of analysis: the reviewers assumed that a positive trial showing a homeopathic treatment to be effective was negated by a different trial showing a different homeopathic treatment for the same condition to be ineffective. But the fact that one homeopathic treatment for a condition is ineffective doesn’t mean that another is ineffective. In addition, several key meta-analyses were unaccountably omitted.[4 5 6]

A meta-analysis published in the *Lancet* in 2005 concluded that there is “weak evidence for a specific effect of homeopathic remedies,” based on the results of just eight trials.[7] Remarkably, this meta-analysis gave no hint of the identity of these eight trials, making informed discussion impossible.

Both these reviews are out of line with the other three systematic reviews and meta-analyses of homeopathy for all conditions published in the peer reviewed literature,[8 9 10] all of which have come to essentially positive conclusions, as have several systematic reviews and meta-analyses for specific conditions.[4 5 6 11]

The negative publications have influenced medical and scientific opinion but had little effect on the public popularity of homeopathy. More recent overviews have had more favourable conclusions, including a health technology assessment commissioned by the Swiss federal government that concluded that homeopathy is “probably” effective for upper respiratory tract infections and allergies.[12]

Readers interested in the clinical evidence can access the CORE-HOM database of clinical research in homeopathy free of charge (www.carstens-stiftung.de/core-hom). It includes 1117 clinical trials of homeopathy, of which about 300 are randomised controlled trials.

Comparative Effectiveness Research

For practical decisions about homeopathy the most relevant evidence is observational comparative effectiveness research examining effectiveness in real world situations, which the Australian review did not include. Several such non-randomised studies have compared outcomes in patients attending family physicians who do and do not integrate homeopathy into their practice.

The multinational comparative effectiveness studies IIPCOS (International Integrative Primary Care Outcomes Studies) compared outcomes in primary care for patients with acute upper respiratory problems. IIPCOS-I included 456 patients treated by 30 doctors at six clinical sites in four countries (including the UK). At 14 days symptoms had resolved for 82.6% of homeopathic patients compared with 68% of patients receiving conventional treatment; the incidence of adverse events was 7.8% and 22.3%, respectively.¹³ The IIPCOS-II study included 1577 patients at 57 primary care sites (10 in the UK) in eight countries, with similar results.¹⁴

Studies in France and Germany show that GPs who integrate homeopathy in their practice have better outcomes than those who do not, for a range of conditions commonly treated in general practice; costs are equivalent and homeopathic GPs use

Homeopathy Can Harm

As the typical homeopathic remedy is devoid of active molecules, it is unlikely to cause serious adverse effects. However, even a placebo can cause harm, if it replaces an effective therapy²⁶; in the words of the Australian report: “People who choose homeopathy may put their health at risk if they reject or delay treatments for which there is good evidence for safety and effectiveness.”³

Yet homeopaths continue to advocate their treatments for many life threatening conditions; some even backed homeopathy for treating patients with Ebola. Others recommend their remedies as a replacement for conventional immunisations.²⁷ With almost no systematic research into such issues, however, nobody can say how often they have caused actual harm to patients; anecdotally, however, I know of several deaths that have occurred in this unnecessary way. The ultramolecular homeopathic remedy might be harmless but the same cannot be said for all homeopaths.²⁶

Because the risk-benefit balance of homeopathy is clearly not positive, even its use as “benign placebo” for self limiting conditions is problematic. In such cases, it would be preferable to reassure patients rather than to deceive them with placebos. In other instances, such an approach seems unnecessary: clinicians administering treatments that are effective with compassion and empathy will also generate a placebo response²⁸—with the additional benefit of a specific therapeutic response. Finally, some claim that homeopathy might be helpful in cases where no specific treatment exists; this argument too is questionable and would apply only to the relatively few patients who cannot be helped even by a symptomatic treatment.

Costs and Opportunity Costs

In the European Union, the annual expenditure on homeopathic (and anthroposophic) remedies exceeds €1bn (£700m; \$1bn).²⁹ Spending by the NHS has declined sharply recently, in line with the evidence supporting homeopathy. The exact spend is unknown but is estimated at £3m-£5m, not including staff or infrastructure. These funds could and should be spent more usefully elsewhere. The notion that the NHS must provide homeopathy for patients who want it is disingenuous: patient choice is, of course, an important principle, but the choice must be evidence based and should not be confused with arbitrariness.

In summary, the axioms of homeopathy are implausible, its benefits do not outweigh its risks, and its costs and opportunity costs are considerable. Therefore, it seems unreasonable, even unethical, for healthcare professionals to recommend its use.

Conclusion

The homeopathic approach to healing maintains a deep respect for symptoms of illness as an important tool of reading a person's immune system. While conventional medicine regards that symptoms as disease conditions of the person that need to be treated, inhibited, suppressed, or biochemically manipulated, homeopaths tend to assume that symptoms are important defences of the organism that are most effectively resolved when treatments nurture and nourish the symptoms in order to initiate a healing process. Ultimately, these two different approaches to healing ailments have led to various conflicts.

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