

Homeopathy: Pros & Cons

Homeopathy has received much adverse publicity and has apparently been discredited by the medical profession. It is often said that it is no more than a placebo. But let's take a look at the evidence.

The Evidence against Homeopathy

The evidence against homeopathy which is so often quoted came entirely from one trial published in the Lancet in 2015 which apparently showed homeopathy to be no better than placebo (see below).

However prior to this there had been five systematic reviews of homeopathy. All showed positive results favouring homeopathy. There is also important evidence from other sources.

A Trial under Investigation for Scientific Fraud

Where did this evidence come from? Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) picked 5 trials out of 178 which apparently showed homeopathy was ineffective. What is less well known is that the original review of the results in 2012 by the NHMRC found there was sound scientific evidence that homeopathy was effective. It found homeopathy was effective in ear infections, in upper respiratory tract infections in adults and for the side-effects of cancer therapies.

Many people didn't like the conclusions that homeopathy worked and an external contractor Optum Insight (Optum) was hired and many think the purpose of this was to get a different result. It discarded 171 studies showing homeopathy was effective and left 5 that showed it didn't work.

They are now being investigated by the Commonwealth Ombudsman and accused of professional misconduct, conflicts of interest and scientific fraud. They were found to have manipulated the evidence by deliberately removing many high quality trials that favoured homeopathy. They arbitrarily removed all trials with a participant number of below 150 to achieve this although there was no scientifically valid reason for this.

Discrediting Homeopathy

Unfortunately many people who criticise homeopathy have the attitude that "it shouldn't work so it doesn't work". But good science never works this way. Science must always fit the theory to the facts rather than the facts to the theory. Dismissing a treatment because we don't know why it works is contrary to every principle of good science.

And there is ample evidence that homeopathy does work as can be seen from the facts below.

Previous Trial Evidence

There have been other systematic reviews (often called meta-analyses) of homeopathy. Linde in 1997 looked at 119 studies and found results with homeopathy were superior to placebo. Linde did a further analysis of 32 trials in 1998, again finding homeopathy was superior to placebo. A study by Cucherat in 2000 of 17 studies showed some evidence that homeopathy was superior to placebo. Hill in 1990 reviewing 40 trials found homeopathy was effective in half the cases. A recent meta-analysis of 75 studies in 2007 found 67 of the studies found an affect beyond that of placebo.

There are also high quality placebo-controlled trials on specific conditions. One on 144 patients with hay fever showed homeopathy gave a significant reduction in symptoms with standard medication halved. The reviewers said there was no evidence to support a placebo response. Similar good quality trials on children's diarrhoea confirmed homeopathy reduced the length of diarrhoea and in a trial in sinusitis the homeopathy group had a complete remission in 3 weeks compared to 9% in the placebo group.

The French EP13 study

This tracked 8500 patients and found that those treated homoeopathically for musculoskeletal conditions needed half as many conventional drugs and had fewer side effects. Those treated for sleep, anxiety and depression problems needed fewer psychotropic drugs and those with respiratory infections did as well as those treated conventionally and needed fewer conventional drugs.

Other Types of Evidence

Trials are only one type of evidence. Homeopaths have often complained that trials do not fit with the individualised approach needed to assess homeopathy properly.

A German doctor, Dr T J Ruckert **analysed all homeopathic cures recorded in Germany over 36 years in** a five volume work and these cures filled 4000 pages. Dr T S Hoyne did much the same in his work Clinical Therapeutics recording **a thousand cures reported in the English language**. These include cures of serious diseases.

The Prasanta Benerji Research Foundation in Calcutta treated 21,888 patients with malignant tumours using homeopathy alone and

obtained regression in 19% of cases with improvement in a further 21%. The results in brain tumours (which are largely untreatable with conventional treatment) were 7% complete cure, 60% improved 22% stable 11% worsening.

The Inadequacy of the Placebo Explanation

Anyone with a passing familiarity with homeopathy will know that even the best homeopathic prescribers often do not get the homeopathic prescription right first time. Homeopathic prescribing can be very complex and it is not uncommon for several incorrect prescriptions to be given before finding the correct remedy which finally works. Homeopath Ellis Barker treated to a patient with throat cancer which he had been told was incurable by ENT doctors. He tried 50 different remedies over a six months period, before finally finding the remedy that led to his cure.

Another example is that of the famous Field-Marshal Count Radetzky (immortalised by Strauss in the Radetzky March) who was cured of a malignant tumour of the right eye by homeopathy when all other treatments had failed. The first 4 remedies had no effect. The fifth stopped the tumour growing and the sixth put the tumour into remission. Radetzky was not satisfied to give mere thanks for the saving of his life and his sight but asked for science to be enriched by his experience and to investigate his cure for the benefit of mankind. This has not happened yet.

If we even to take a dozen cases like this the odds against homeopathy being due to placebo would reach millions to one against. In reality there are hundreds of thousands of cases of this nature making it infinitely less likely.

Dr James Compton Burnett was a young doctor in the mid-nineteenth century. After being initially enthusiastic about medicine he had become disillusioned and was thinking of changing career. However a colleague persuaded him to study homeopathy and "either refute it or use it". Homeopathy was regarded with the same degree of disdain that as it is today.

He worked in a paediatric unit where children could be sent to the main hospital the next day. These mainly children with febrile illnesses and there was a high mortality. He obtained a bottle of Aconite and instructed the nurses to give it to all the children that were admitted on one side of the ward but not on the other. The next day, all the children but one (with measles) on that side of the ward had no fever and were playing. Those on the other side of the ward were the same or worse. This continued day after day. All those on the aconite side got better (except those with gastro-enteritis and specific infections like measles) but with no improvement in those children on the other side. Burnett was dumbfounded. However he was soon to face a mutiny and the senior nurse told him they had stopped "his cruel experiment". From then on all the children on the ward were given aconite.

Burnett went on to cure himself of a long-standing pain that he had seen many doctors about. He had great faith in these eminent doctors but none of their treatments helped (here a placebo affect might have been expected to take place). He then tried a homeopathic remedy and the pain was gone within two weeks. Burnett went on to have a distinguished career as a homeopathic doctor, curing a wide range of conditions in his patients, including many cancers.

A Sceptic's Tale

I think it hardly surprising that many doctors oppose homeopathy. Given it's inherently implausibility; it is not always easy to remain open-minded. So I think the case of Thomas Skinner, an eminent gynaecologist at the turn of the twentieth century makes interesting reading. He felt it his duty to take a stand against homeopathy whenever possible and, in his own words, took an active part in putting it down. He was instrumental in barring homeopaths entry from major medical institutions.

However he then developed an incapacitating illness of his gut which "allopathic medicines proved powerless to cure". As a last resort he was persuaded to try homeopathy. He said "I shall never forget the marvellous change which the first few doses affected within a few weeks – restoring me to a life of usefulness and full vigour". He went on to study and practice the therapy that had saved his life, eventually writing the book "Homeopathy and Gynaecology".

I think being sceptical makes sense with any unusual therapy but surely with an open mind. But the tragedy is not that people are sceptical; it is "contempt without investigation" which is the problem. This keeps us in perpetual ignorance.

The Properties of Water

Water molecules have been found to polarize around other charged molecules and store and carry its frequency. Russian scientist found water can store a memory of an applied electric field and this ability carry the frequency of other molecules has been noted by Italian scientist Emilio Del Giudice and the late Giuliano Preparata from the Milan Institute of Nuclear Physics. This was confirmed by Nobel laureate Luc Montagnier. Basically a frequency can be imprinted into water which can then amplify it. This is very similar to how homeopathic remedies are made and provides a good explanation of why homeopathy works.

The Cost

There is also a campaign to remove homeopathy from the NHS due to its cost. But the cost is miniscule compared to conventional treatment.

(Annual cost of homeopathy £10 million, total NHS budget, £110 billion, cost of inpatient treatment of adverse drug reactions £466 million).

Although homeopathy remains controversial, as it always has been, I believe there is more than enough evidence available to convince any person with an open mind.