

Homeopathy: The Side Effects of Inert “Remedies”

Homeopathy emerged from experiments by Samuel Hahnemann's (1755-1843) a German physician who was dissatisfied with common medical practices of his day, such as purging, bloodletting, and the use of toxic chemicals. Based on his applied theory and observation he championed the law of cure known as:

*"Similia Similibus Curentur", or "Like Cures Like". ... "that a remedy that produces symptoms in a healthy person will cure those same symptoms when manifested by a person in a diseased state."*¹

To his credit, Samuel Hahnemann also emphasized the importance of good hygiene, nursing, diet, bed rest, and isolation of patients during epidemic diseases.

Practitioners of homeopathy will assert that this intervention has been verified by millions of homoeopaths all over the world. However, these assertions have not been verified by blinded randomized clinical trials as reported by Münchener Modell, Centre for Complementary Medicine Research,² which concluded:

The results of our meta-analysis are not compatible with the hypothesis that the clinical effects of homeopathy are completely due to placebo.

... However, we found insufficient evidence from these studies that homeopathy is clearly efficacious for any single clinical condition. Further research on homeopathy is warranted provided it is rigorous and systematic.

(Emphasis added)

Importantly, practitioners of homeopathy cannot so easily label a research group that specializes in complementary medicine to be biased. Indeed we might judge the first part of their interpretation a kindness, because any randomized study testing even identical placebos will favor one arm or the other based on chance alone; a reason statistically significant differences and reproducibility are required to prove causality³.

So how did the widespread acceptance of homeopathy come to be in its time, and why is it still practiced today by millions?

A competing theory of the time, blood letting, was likely based on the presumed need to eliminate from the body that which was causing it harm. In its day such harmful practices were not difficult to displace by good hygiene, bed rest, and yes, providing water with dilute trace elements – adequate *hydration*. These commonsense practices would indeed be superior to purging - trace elements in the water or not. Even today,

1 Dr. Samuel Christian Frederic Hahnemann, M.D. (1755 - 1843)
http://www.wholehealthnow.com/homeopathy_pro/samuel_hahnemann.html

² Are the clinical effects of homeopathy placebo effects? A meta-analysis of placebo-controlled trials. Linde K, Clausius N, Ramirez G, Melchart D, Eitel F, Hedges LV, Jonas WB. Lancet. 1997 Sep 20;350(9081):834-43. Erratum in: Lancet 1998 Jan 17;351(9097):220. PMID: 9310601

³ **Causality** denotes a necessary relationship between one event (called cause) and another event (called effect) which is the direct consequence (result) of the first. - Random House Unabridged Dictionary

study methods that do not account for less obvious confounding variables will lead to false conclusions.

Importantly, clinical science as practiced today would require plausibility, based on preclinical experiments in cell culture, in animals, or insights into disease processes, such as the identification of pathways in cancer cells that cause malignant behavior. In early clinical phase testing, pharmacokinetics would carefully determine the blood levels and clearance rates of new drugs in the body in order to identify a dose that has a treatment effects with acceptable side effects.

The homeopathic dose is said to be "*typically one part of the 'remedy' to one trillion parts of water.*" which does not (cannot) account for the impact on digestive processes, such as the effect of the highly acidic environment of the stomach; or that variable trace elements will also be in the water we drink on a daily basis. In short, Hahnemann's eighteenth-century theory has not been validated or deemed plausible today, nor should we expect it to be.

Yet, homeopathic practices persists, most likely because doing nothing is often a good approach to common self-limiting medical conditions, and because it's considered a relatively innocuous practice by medical groups and regulatory agencies, which have many pressing responsibilities and limited resources.

I think that the practice remains common is unfortunate and potentially dangerous in some cases, such as when patients defer proven treatments for serious conditions to use homeopathic products. Also the prevalent use of homeopathy shows that our society hasn't done a good job of explaining scientific method, and the limitations of observations, or what constitutes plausible clinical science.

That the Food and Drug Administration does not prevent the sale of homeopathic products as remedies, even if for common "self-limiting" conditions,⁴ confuses the public about standards of evidence. Inadvertently, I believe such leniency for an inert product validates this and other implausible medical practices; and sometimes endangers patients when homeopathy is illegally prescribed for serious indications.

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⁴ Homeopathy: Real Medicine or Empty Promises? http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/096_home.html