

Is over-the-counter homeopathy safe?

# The power of the placebo

**B**oots yesterday launched a new range of over-the-counter homeopathic remedies. The reaction was predictable. Some alternative practitioners welcomed this, others were more reserved. Conventional doctors remained sceptical. John Garrow, Professor of Nutrition at St Bartholomew's Hospital and chairman of Healthwatch, pointed out that none of these preparations had been tested in a clinical trial.

Such concerns are well merited. Viewers of Rob Buckman's recent BBC series, *Medicine or Magic*, may recall a poignant scene. Dr Buckman interviewed a young doctor at the Charing Cross Hospital's migraine clinic, where he had just finished a controlled trial of homeopathic treatment for migraine. Two groups of 30 patients had received either homeopathy or a placebo. The trial was "blind" — neither patient nor doctor knew who had received what. The researcher had already analysed his data, and knew that one group did significantly better — but which was it? One could see the disappointment in the doctor's face as the statistician told him that the placebo had outperformed homeopathy.

Most doctors will have found that result surprising, not because they believe homeopathy works, but because the scientific wisdom remains that homeopathy is itself a placebo — though the migraine trial suggested that it was not a particularly good one.

Scientists remain sceptical about homeopathy, because it is based on the unbelievable idea that the more you dilute a substance, the stronger it becomes. Thus, homeopaths believe that the strongest drugs are those which have been so diluted that no molecule is left of the original substance. Scientists take the opposite view — after all, it is more difficult to get drunk on low-alcohol wine than a strong gin.

It is also forgotten that homeopathy began life as a placebo. Its founder, Samuel Hahnemann, a 19th-century German physician, noted that patients who received no medical treatment often did better than those who had been treated. As the drugs of the day included arsenic, lead, and mercury, this was not surprising.

As an observant doctor he also knew that giving a patient *something* remained an important part of any treatment. The answer was homeopathy — a system of treatment which would be without side-effects,

since nothing was left of the original compound, but still allowed the doctor to be able to prescribe.

If homeopathy is a placebo, why is it increasingly popular? There are several reasons. Placebos work. What is sometimes called the non-specific effect of treatment is often the most powerful intervention available to any doctor, alternative or conventional. Treating patients with understanding and courtesy, listening to their distress, giving an explanation (correct or not), and instilling hope of recovery, are central to the practice of medicine. Homeopaths are no worse at this than any other doctor, and in terms of time and courtesy may be better.

Homeopathy also fits with the expectations of many patients; when describing their treatment,



**Hahnemann: the originator**

homeopaths often use words such as gentle and natural. It also fits with our increasing concern over green and environmental issues; homeopathy is free from side-effects.

In our increasingly consumer-led health service, should we not welcome this expansion in homeopathy's availability? Not necessarily. The absence of reliable clinical trials means customers are possibly being taken for a ride. Second, there continue to be occasional reports of patients with serious diseases, such as diabetes, cancer, and asthma, treated homeopathically with disastrous results, when conventional medicine can offer solutions. Such cases are deplored by most medically qualified homeopaths. Nevertheless such quackery exists, and seems beyond the reach of regulatory authorities.

**A**s a psychiatrist I have one further concern. Research has consistently shown that patients who turn to homeopathy are likely to be dissatisfied with conventional medicine, and to have below-average emotional health. Perhaps the main attraction of homeopathy is that it enables such people to seek help free from the stigma of mental illness.

If they are fortunate enough to encounter a homeopathist who has the skill, patience and time to help emotional distress, no harm, and some benefit, may result. However, it is hard to see how any such benefit will result from taking an over-the-counter homeopathic medicine.

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