



The Science of Homeopathy

Homeopathy was developed in 1796 by Samuel Hahnemann, a leading scientist who studied medicine and chemistry. It is grounded in scientific thinking and based on accurate documentation. A review of the scientific basis of homeopathy concludes that there is sufficient pre-clinical and clinical evidence of its effectiveness to justify and confirm its place in the medical establishment.

Homeopathy is a medical therapy that cures by stimulating the organism's own ability to re-establish health. Symptoms are carefully evaluated and medicinal products are used, micro dose stimuli of substances which would produce in healthy people symptoms similar to those of the sick person ('the simile principle').

In many countries homeopathy has an equal status with conventional medicine. Chile (end of the 19th century), Nigeria (1961), India (1973), Brazil (1979) and Cuba (1992) have all integrated homeopathy into their health services. In some European countries, such as France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Latvia, homeopathy is acknowledged by the medical associations as an official specialisation for physicians. In the UK it is partly integrated into the public health system. There is a growing number of homeopathic doctors; they are trained in both conventional and homeopathic treatments, and very often choose to treat with homeopathy.

Homeopathy – the evidence base

Homeopathy can provide over 200 years of successful clinical experience. In addition, there exist a considerable number of homeopathic studies which fulfil the strictest criteria of evidence based medicine and demonstrate evidence of effectiveness. The most extensive and carefully collected review of homeopathic clinical trials is Kleijnen et al.'s Clinical trials of homeopathy (*Br Med J* 1991, 302(6772):316-323), which systematically searched a total of 107 studies for three years and assessed them according to a panel of criteria relating to the quality of the studies. 81 studies showed a result in favour of homeopathy (compared with placebo), 24 did not. Of the studies with the highest qualitative rating, 15 showed significant results in favour of homeopathy and only 7 did not. The authors stated: 'The amount of positive evidence even among the best studies came as a surprise to us. Based on this evidence we would be ready to accept that homeopathy can be efficacious, if only the mechanism of action were more plausible.'

The most recent comprehensive work about homeopathy consists in the results of a five-year Health Technology Assessment (large scale multi level research design), which was initiated by the Swiss authorities involving many independent international university researchers in order to evaluate the benefits of complementary medicine within the national health system. The authors concluded that: 'the effectiveness of homeopathy can be supported by clinical evidence and with professional and adequate application can be seen as safe'.

There are many other good reviews of research studies available and many research studies show positive results for homeopathy. The best examples can be found within three areas - childhood diarrhoea, influenza, and seasonal allergic rhinitis.

Nevertheless, today's 'gold standard' of evidence based medicine, the randomised controlled clinical trial (RCT), is not well suited to the specific nature of certain types of highly individualised homeopathic treatment. New more appropriate approaches to research design are being successfully pursued in order to overcome methodological problems.



Safety

The method of manufacture of homeopathic medicines dates from Hahnemann. He started to dilute the test substances sequentially (in 1:10 or 1:100 steps), shaking the solution vigorously (known as succussion). This process is known as potentisation. When administering to healthy subjects he noticed that the treatment effect was enhanced whereas toxic or adverse effects were diminished. This favourable safety profile of homeopathic medicines still applies and there are very few published reports of adverse events.

How does it work?

The plausibility of the working model of homeopathy remains the greatest obstacle to its more widespread acceptance. The high dilutions used in approximately 25% of homeopathic medicines sold mean that in some cases the homeopathic medicines used no longer contain molecules of the starting material. Hahnemann stated that he could not explain the working mechanism, but just observed the therapeutic effect.

Two hundred years later, there are a number of hypotheses to explain the effect of potentisation. The more recent ones, with nuclear magnetic resonance and ultra-violet spectroscopy as well as with electrochemical and thermodynamic measurements, show differences between homeopathic potencies and the control medium that are quite significant. It seems that there is an interactive effect between potentised high dilutions and a living organism. However we are still far from understanding what happens during the potentisation procedure.

For further information and a complete list of references please visit www.echamp.eu or contact media@echamp.eu.