

This is the first draft by NHS Choices for a more accurate description of homeopathy on the NHS Choices web site. It was sent to David Mattin on 29 January 2010. Almost two years later, after it had been eviscerated by the Department of Health, a quite different, and less accurate, page was published by NHS Choices

Final draft for uploading

Introduction

Homeopathy is based on the principle of using remedies made up of highly diluted substances, which are alleged to trigger the body's natural ability to heal.

Homeopaths (practitioners of homeopathy) have claimed that it can be used to treat a wide range of conditions, both physical such as asthma, and psychological such as depression.

Homeopathy is a complementary or alternative medicine (CAM). This means that osteopathy is different in important ways from treatments that are part of conventional western medicine. Unlike conventional treatments, the use of homeopathy is not always based on scientific evidence. You can learn more about the difference between CAMs and conventional medicine by reading 'What do we mean by CAMs?'

History and principles

Homeopathy was devised by a German doctor called Samuel Hahnemann during the 1790s. Hahnemann had a series of ideas that evolved into the principles of homeopathy.

Like cures like

The first idea was that a substance that would cause symptoms in a healthy person can be used to cure the same symptoms in someone who is ill. For example, if somebody is suffering from insomnia, they can be treated with a homeopathic remedy that contains extracts of coffee. Homeopaths refer to this as the principle of 'like cures like'.

Potentisation

Hahnemann's second idea is that the more you dilute a substance, the more you increase its power to treat symptoms that it would otherwise cause.

Homeopaths refer to this as the principle of 'potentisation'.

Succession and proving

Hahnemann stated that to be effective, the process of dilution had to be performed in a very specific manner.

For example, a substance, such as a herb like belladonna, should be diluted into a glass container containing water or alcohol. The vessel is then shaken firmly 10 times. Homeopaths believe that by shaking the vessel you can 'imprint the healing energy of the medicinal substance throughout the body of water'.

The process of dilution and shaking is then repeated multiple times, with some homeopathic remedies being diluted by one drop in a hundred, thirty times over (a 30C dilution). This process is known as succession.

As the succession process is ongoing, a group of volunteers will take six doses of the remedy at different dilutions over the course of two days. They will record any mental or physical symptoms in a diary. Each person's diary is then collated into a list of symptoms called a repertory. This process is known as 'proving'.

Hahnemann's 'forgotten principle'

Hahnemann's third idea was that all diseases originate from the sexually transmitted infections (STIs) gonorrhoea and syphilis, and from 'psora' – which was a term used at the time to describe itchy skin conditions such as scabies.

This third principle has now largely been disowned by most modern homeopaths due to the large body of evidence contradicting Hahnemann's idea about the causes of disease.

Does it work?

Many independent experts would respond to this question 'no, homeopathy does not work'

There is no good quality clinical evidence to show that homeopathy is more successful than placebo in the treatment of any type of condition.

A placebo is the unusual but well-documented psychological effect that sometimes occurs when a person is given a 'dummy' medication, such as a sugar pill. They feel better after taking the pill because they think that they are being given real medication.

Furthermore, if the principles of homeopathy were true it would violate all the existing theories of science that we make use of today; not just our theory of medicine, but also chemistry, biology and physics.

Homeopathy and the NHS

Despite the lack of clinical evidence, homeopathy remains a popular complementary therapy and it is available on the NHS. In the UK, there are several NHS homeopathic hospitals and some GP practices also offer homeopathic treatment.

Homeopathy is also practised privately. The prices for an initial consultation with a homeopath can vary from £20-80. The costs of homeopathic tablets or other products usually range from around £4-10.

What happens

Your first session with a homeopath will usually involve an initial consultation where the homeopath will ask you about your symptoms but will also ask about your general well-being, emotional state, lifestyle and diet.

This is an attempt to build up a 'symptom picture', and once your 'symptom picture' has been identified then it is matched to a similar symptom in their repertory, which should also contain the appropriate remedy to treat your symptoms.

You will then be given a course of the remedy.

Your homeopath may recommend that you attend a follow-up appointment so the effects of the remedy on your health can be assessed.

Common uses

Homeopaths believe that homeopathy can help with any condition which the body has the potential to self-repair. As a result, they suggest that homeopathy can be used to treat a wide range of acute and chronic medical conditions.

The most common conditions that people seek homeopathic treatment for are:

- asthma,
- depression,
- ear infections,
- hay fever,
- other mental health conditions, such as stress and anxiety,
- allergies, such as food allergies,
- dermatitis (an allergic skin condition),
- arthritis, and
- high blood pressure.

Homeopathy and conventional medicines

Most of the voluntary homeopathic professional bodies, such as the British Homeopathic Organisation, maintain that homeopathy should be used as a complementary treatment alongside conventional treatment, not as an alternative.

However there are a minority of, often very vocal, homeopaths who are dismissive of the effectiveness of conventional medicines. Many of these homeopaths claim that homeopathy is an effective treatment for many serious and sometimes life-threatening conditions and no other type of conventional treatment is required.

These conditions include:

- HIV / AIDS,
- cancer,
- type 2 diabetes,
- heart disease,
- malaria,
- flu, including swine flu, and
- serious mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia and anorexia.

The use of homeopathy as the sole treatments for the conditions listed above is not recommended.

Homeopathic remedies are also not recommended as an alternative to vaccination, such as the mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccine.

Safety and regulation

Regulation

There is no law covering the regulation of homeopathy and homeopaths in England. This means there is nothing to stop anyone, whatever their level of training or expertise, advertising their services as a homeopath.

Due to this fact, if you do decide to visit a homeopath, it is recommended that you choose one registered with the various voluntary homeopathic organisations. These organisations will usually only accept registration from individuals with sufficient training who agree to abide by codes of practice, standards and safety.

Some leading homeopathic organisations in England include:

- [Alliance of Registered Homeopaths](#),
- [The Society of Homeopaths](#),
- [British Homeopathic Organisation](#), and
- [Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine](#).

Voluntary regulation aims to protect patient safety, but it does not mean that there is scientific evidence that a treatment is effective.

Safety

Homeopathic remedies are thought to be extremely safe and the risks of a serious adverse side effect arising from taking these remedies is thought to be extremely small – certainly much smaller than the side effects associated with conventional medicine.

However critics of homeopathy have argued that the reason the remedies are so safe is that they do not contain any active ingredients, and are simply sugar pills.

As one critic put it 'if a medication does not have any side effects, then it is not an effective medication'

Evidence

The dilution problem

One of the biggest problems scientists have in accepting that homeopathy is based on valid scientific principles is known as the dilution problem.

The dilution problem refers to the fact that the active ingredient used in homeopathy is diluted to such an extent during the succession process is that there is often not even one molecule of the active ingredient would be left in the remedy.

To give an example of the scale of the dilution used in homeopathy, imagine that you had a huge glass tank that was capable of holding the entire Atlantic Ocean. You then filled the tank with alcohol.

If you then carried out a 6C dilution, which is what some homeopathic remedies are sold as, you would have enough alcohol left to fill an egg-cup. If you carried out a 30C dilution, which is what many homeopathic are sold at, you would probably not even have a molecule of alcohol left.

Or to put it another way, if you used homeopathic methods to create a paracetamol tablet that had the same dosage as a standard paracetamol, then your homeopathic tablet would weigh more than the entire universe.

Lack of clinical evidence

The second issue that many critics of homeopathy raise is the lack of conclusive clinical evidence from medical trials to show that homeopathy is effective.

For example, a study published in The Lancet, in 2005, looked at over 100 clinical trials and could find no evidence that homeopathy worked any better than placebo.

Homeopaths response to criticism

Homeopaths response to the issues raised by the dilution problem is that the critics are missing the point of the succession process. It is not necessary for any of the original substance to remain as the succession process somehow imprints a 'memory' of the substance into the water.

The claim that water has a memory is a controversial one to say the least, and it is rejected by most mainstream scientists.

Also, the claim that water does have a memory does raise the puzzling question of why the water we drink everyday appears to have no effect on us. Drinking water is constantly being recycled and the water you drink has probably passed through different pipes, rivers and reservoirs, not to mention the bladders of other humans.

As for the lack of clinical evidence many homeopaths have argued that most medical trials are run means that they are inherently at odds with the way that homeopathy works.

Medical trials are usually:

- **randomised** - where nobody knows who is getting what treatment until the trial has finished, and
- **standardised** - where everyone receives a similar sort of treatment and their symptoms are recorded in the same way.

Homeopaths argue that the principles of standardisation and randomisation go against the principles of homeopathy as each patient requires an individual approach that has been specifically designed for their individual circumstances.

However, other complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs), that are also based on an individual approach to patients, such as acupuncture and osteopathy, have proved successful in

clinical trials.

Useful links - internal

Health A-Z: - other CAM topic (tbc)
Health A-Z: clinical trials
Complementary therapies for cancer

Useful links - external

[Alliance of Registered Homeopaths](#)

[Society of Homeopaths](#)

[ICNM: complementary medicine](#)

[British Homeopathic Association](#)

[Faculty of Homeopathy](#)

[Homeopathy - Sense About Science](#)