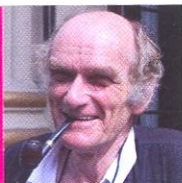


A placebo and a fraud

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David Colquhoun challenges claims made in an article on homeopathy published in the last issue of *NHE*

In the last issue of *National Health Executive*, I wrote a piece called *Medicines that contain no medicine and other follies*. In the interests of what journalists call balance, but might better be called equal time for the Flat Earth Society, an article appeared straight after mine called *Integrating Homeopathy into Primary Care*.

It was by Rachel Roberts "research consultant for the Society of Homeopaths". There is no way to put this politely. It was one of the most misleading and mendacious attempts at a defence that I have ever seen.

As always, the first step is to Google the author, to find out a bit more. It seems that Rachel Roberts runs a business called *Integrated Homeopathic Training* - a financial interest that was not mentioned in her article. She will sell you flash cards - *matmedcards* - for £70 (plus £9 p&p) for 120 cards.

The card for *Conium maculatum* is remarkable. What it says on the reverse side is: "The poison used to execute Socrates. No 1 remedy for scirrhus breast cancer. Esp after blow to the breast..."

No doubt she would claim that the word "remedy" was a special weasel word of homeopaths that did not imply any therapeutic efficacy. But its use in this context seems to me to be cruel deception, even murderous.

It also appears to breach the Cancer Act 1939.

I asked the Bristol Trading Standards Office and got a reply remarkably quickly. It ended thus: "the use of the card for "hemlock" as an example amounts to advice in connection with the treatment (of cancer). I will initially write to IHT and require that they remove this and any other reference to cancer treatment from their website."

When I checked again a couple of weeks later, the hemlock card had been replaced by one about chamomile which it described as "the opium of homeopathy").

Luckily, the pills contain no opium (and no chamomile either) or that would be breaking another law. Bafflingly, it is not yet against the law to sell pills that contain no trace of the ingredient on the label if they are labelled 'homeopathic'.

Presumably the packs still contain a claim to cure cancer. And what is said in the privacy of the consulting room will never be known.

Political correctness is a curious thing. I felt slightly guilty when I reported this breach of the Cancer Act. It felt almost sneaky. The feeling didn't last long though. We are talking about sick people here.

It isn't hard to imagine a

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desperate woman suffering from cancer reading that Ms Roberts knows the "number 1 remedy for scirrhus breast cancer". She might actually believe it. She might buy some hemlock pills that contain no hemlock or anything else. She might die as a result. It is not a joke. It is, literally, deadly serious. It is also deadly serious the Department of Health and some NHS managers are so stifled by political correctness that they refer to homeopaths as "professionals" and pay them money.

Ms Roberts, in her article, is at pains to point out that "registered members of the Society of Homeopaths (identified by the designation RSHom) have met required standards of education, are fully insured and have agreed to abide by a strict code of ethics and practice."

Well, it is already well known that the code of ethics of the Society of Homeopaths is something of a joke. Here is another example. In their code of ethics, paragraph 72 says homeopaths have a legal obligation 'to avoid making claims whether explicit or implied, orally or in writing, implying cure of any named disease.' Like, perhaps, claiming to have the "No 1 remedy for scirrhus breast cancer"? Obviously voluntary self regulation isn't worth the paper it's written on.

You don't need to go to her website to find "claims . . . implying cure of any named disease". In her article she says: "conditions which responded well to homeopathy included childhood eczema and asthma, migraine, menopausal problems, inflammatory bowel disease, irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, depression and chronic fatigue syndrome."

No doubt they will say that the claim the asthma and migraine "responded well" to their sugar pills carries no suggestion that they can cure a named disease. And if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

I have to say that I find Ms Roberts' article exceedingly puzzling. It comes with 29 references so it looks, to use Goldacre's word, 'sciencey'. If you read the references and more importantly, know about all the work that isn't referred to, you see it is the very opposite of science. I see only two options. Either it is deliberate deception designed to make money or it shows, to a mind-boggling extent, an inability to understand what constitutes evidence.

The latter, more charitable, view is supported by the fact that Ms Roberts trots out, yet again, the infamous 2005 Spence paper as though it constituted evidence for anything at all.

In this paper, 6,544 patients at the Bristol Homeopathic Hospital were asked if they felt better after attending the outpatient department. Half of them reported that they felt 'better' or 'much better'.

Another 20% said they were 'slightly better' (but that is what you say to be nice to the doctor).

The patients were not compared with any other group at all. What could be less surprising than that half of the relatively minor complaints that get referred for homeopathy get 'better or much better' on their own?

This sort of study can't even tell you if homeopathic treatment has a placebo effect, never mind that it has a real effect of its own. It is a sign of the desperation of homeopaths that they keep citing this work.

Whatever the reason, the conclusion is clear. Never seek advice from someone who has a financial interest in the outcome.

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Ms Roberts makes her living from homeopathy. If she were to come to the same conclusion as the rest of the world, that it is a placebo and a fraud, her income would vanish. It is asking too much of anyone to do that.

This is the mistake made time and time again by the Department of Health and by the NHS. The Pittilo Report does the same thing. The execrably bad assessment of evidence in that report is, one suspects, not unrelated to the fact that it was done entirely by people who would lose their jobs if they were to come to any conclusion other than their treatments work.

At present, the regulation of alternative medicine is chaotic because the government and the dozen or so different quangos involved are trying to regulate while avoiding the single most important question - do the treatments work? They should now grasp that nettle and refer the question to NICE.