

For debate

Potentization—just a myth?

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One of the fundamental tenets of homoeopathy is the concept of potentization, and yet it continues to be one of the major stumbling blocks to widespread acceptance of the discipline. As a basis for further discussion this paper provides a brief historical background to the subject and reviews some approaches adopted by homoeopaths in publications principally aimed at the consumer.

The teachings of Hahnemann and later homoeopaths

Samuel Hahnemann discusses potentization in the *Organon*, Aphorism 269.

For its own special purpose and by its own special procedure, never tried before my time, homoeopathy develops the inner, spirit-like medicinal powers of crude substance to a degree hitherto unheard of and makes all of them exceedingly, even immeasurably, penetratingly effective and helpful, even those substances that in the crude state do not have the slightest medicinal effect on the human organism.¹

George Vithoulkas, in his book *Homoeopathy: Medicine of the New Man*, enthuses about the discovery and efficacy of potentization.

To this day, it is not exactly known how Hahnemann came upon the procedure (of diluting medicines to avoid toxic effects); most likely, it arose from his knowledge of chemistry and alchemy. In any case, he simply submitted each dilution to a series of vigorous shakes (or 'succussions', as he called them) and discovered that progressive dilutions were then not only less toxic but also more potent. Hahnemann had found a solution to a problem that had occupied medical men throughout history. He had beaten the problem of the 'side effect' of drugs.²

Vithoulkas concludes that this phenomenon

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cannot be explained by ordinary chemical mechanisms, pointing out that in many cases the dilutions are so astronomical that not even one molecule of the original medicine is left in solution. He quotes Hahnemann:

The homoeopathic system of medicine develops, for its special use, to a hitherto unheard-of degree, the inner medicinal powers of the crude substances by means of a process peculiar to it and which has hitherto never been tried, whereby only they all become immeasurably and penetratingly efficacious and remedial.²

Hahnemann's theories of potentization are summed up by Clover:

- They are provocative and important insights developed by Hahnemann throughout at least 40 years of diligent pioneer work on the basis of homoeopathic medicine, with their expression in his final decade representing his mature views.
- They are supported today by the insights into human dynamics developing in various schools of psychotherapy.
- A careful pursuit of their implications is vital to an ongoing understanding of the similia principle and its application with potentized medicines.³

The great American homoeopath James Tyler Kent, in his *Lectures on Homoeopathic Philosophy*, discusses the need for potentization, using the example of *Sulphur*.

Vital disorder cannot be turned into order except by something similar in quality to the vital force. It is not similitude in quantity that we want, in weights and measures, but it is similarity in quality, in power, in plane, that must be sought for. Medicines, therefore, cannot affect the high and interior planes of the physical economy unless they are raised to the plane of similarity in quality. The individual who needs Sulphur in the very highest degrees may take sufficient remedy to move his bowels, may rub it upon the skin, may wear it in his stockings, can take Sulphur baths, all without effect upon his disease. In that form the drug is not in correspondence with his sickness. It does not

affect him in the same plane in which he is sick, and so it cannot affect the cause and flow from thence to the circumference.⁴

Natrum muriaticum is also cited as an example of the powers of potentization.

The transmutation, by means of the peculiar mode of preparation adopted in homoeopathy, of a substance like salt, which is apparently inert in its crude state, into a heroic medicine, the use of which requires the greatest discrimination, is one of the most convincing proofs, even to the most prejudiced, of the fact that the peculiar processes of trituration and succussion resorted to in homoeopathy, bring to light a new world of powers which Nature keeps latent in crude substances.⁵

Coulter highlights the problems in understanding how homoeopathic medicines can possibly work at infinitesimal doses.

Homoeopathy is most closely associated in the public mind with the supposedly 'illogical' principle that the power of a medicine increases with dilution, and with the corollary of this principle: that the greatest power is to be found in the small or infinitesimal dose.

These have been major points of criticism by non-homoeopathic physicians. And, indeed, both of these principles have been sources of amazement to the homoeopathic physicians themselves (who are medically well-informed and fully aware of the scientific issues involved).⁶

He offers evidence to demonstrate the existence of a force of undefined nature in homoeopathic small doses. Biochemical, botanical, bacteriological and zoological investigations are discussed. 'Is there anyone who will claim a placebo effect on plants?' he asks.

Rejection of the 'monotonicity rule' in homoeopathy is also mentioned. This states that 'an increased dose of medicine gives an increased effect, while a lower dose gives a lesser effect'.

Whether or not the homoeopaths have provided a satisfactory explanation for the heightened power of their infinitesimal doses, it is still true that many objections to this homoeopathic principle are based on the unproven assumption that larger doses of medicines always provoke a more powerful response than smaller doses.⁶

The transformation of the therapeutic

properties of natural bodies through the mechanical action of trituration and succussion is quite remarkable. This phenomenon has been the subject of much debate, based on the non-medicinal diluent (alcohol, water or lactose) having an auxiliary, though indispensable, function. Coulter's views on this subject may be rather dated now, but they continue to be interesting in a historical context.

These succussed high dilutions represent stereospecific isotactic polymers imprinted in the solvent by the solute, with self-replicating qualities in the absence of the initial solute. As in cytoplasmic molecular chemistry, the information content of the solute may reproduce itself separate from its chemical action.⁶

Bernard Poitevin, in an article entitled 'Mechanism of action of homoeopathic medicines' presents 4 elements that seem vital for the 'high dilution message' to be transmitted.

- The molecular specificity of the constituents of the base substance; this survives in very dilute solutions.
- The role of the solvent as support and perhaps 'message conductor'.
- The part played by succussion.
- The theories relating to electromagnetic-type effects may contribute to a better understanding of the characteristics of the biological information contained in high dilutions.⁷

The general lack of good quality scientific research has meant that numerous theoretical explanations have been advanced—many of them so plausible that they are just as difficult to disprove as to prove. Colin Lessell explains much of the physicochemical foundations of various theories on homoeopathic potentization, highlighting the deficiencies of each.⁸

Singh and Chhabra⁹ state that there is a rigorous scientific basis behind the use of the 3 main diluent media in homoeopathy but that water has received most attention. A number of writers concentrate on the question of how information is stored in water, in particular when the substance is present in minute quantities, as in high-potency homoeopathy.

Endler, in a report on a symposium entitled *Water and Information*, states that use of the concept of information transfer leads us to change our understanding of the nature of substance itself, from the old static conception to

one in which substance is understood in terms of processes.¹⁰

The main features of a new model for associated liquids have been expounded by Antonchenko and Ilyin.¹¹ They suggest that the stability of various dissipative structures in water systems can be explained by their presence in the earth's electromagnetic field and by the stabilizing processes of proton transfer along hydrogen-bonded chains in these structures. A possible connection between processes occurring in dissipative water structures and the radiation characteristics of homoeopathic preparations is drawn.

Other authors concentrate on the more philosophical aspects of understanding the nature of potentization and succussion. For example, George Vithoukas states:

We know that the more there is succussion and dilution, the more the therapeutic power is increased, even beyond the point of there being even one molecule of the original substance remaining. As far as is yet known, there is no available explanation in modern physics or chemistry for this phenomenon. It appears that some new form of energy is released by this technique. The energy which is contained in a limited form in the original substance is somehow released and transmitted to the molecules of the solvent. Once the original substance is no longer present, the remaining energy in the solvent can be continually enhanced ad infinitum. The solvent molecules have taken on the dynamic energy of the original substance.¹²

According to Clover,

It is ... reasonable today to deduce that trituration, succussion and dilution may be sufficiently frictional to reduce the more overt levels of energies in medicines and release their hidden forms. We may also deduce further that such exposed energetic forms may then be able suitably to interact with the psychological factors and other subtle energies governing the processes of our own bodies.³

The 'morphic resonance' theory of Dr Rupert Sheldrake is reviewed by van Galen.¹³ Evolutionary forming and learning bring about a collective kind of memory, which may manifest in future generations. This kind of memory is not transmitted through inheritance of DNA, but transforms itself into a morphogenetic energetic unit which exists outside the species and which may influence the form of future

processes. van Galen concludes that if morphic resonance can be shown experimentally, Sheldrake's hypothesis could prove to be of great importance to homoeopathy. George Adams discussed potentization and the peripheral forces of nature, giving parallels with projective geometry.¹⁴ Grange and Denman offer microdose-mediated immune modulation as a possible key to a scientific re-evaluation of homoeopathy.¹⁵ All these ideas, while integral to much of the teaching of homoeopathy, do cause considerable obstacles for its more widespread acceptance.

Perhaps one piece of research has gone further than any other in proving that homoeopathic potencies are not just a myth. In a paper published in *The Lancet*, Taylor Reilly, Taylor *et al* discuss whether homoeopathy is solely a placebo response, reporting a controlled trial of homoeopathic potency, with pollen in hayfever as a model. In their conclusion they stated:

The drug we used was potentized to the point where, in theory, none of the original material remained. Yet those results and those of the pilot study offer no support for the suggestion that the observed effects were wholly due to placebo responses. As such they are a contemporary restatement of an empirical puzzle now in its second century and represent a confusing challenge to orthodox scientific models.¹⁶

However, Davey wrote in an editorial published in the *British Homoeopathic Journal*: By its very nature the Taylor Reilly's work has raised many more questions than it answered. ... Research strategy initially must encompass the three basic issues of efficacy, safety, quality control of production.¹⁷

Other writers advance a similar view, expressing a wish to concentrate on improving homoeopathy rather than proving it.¹⁸

Comments in consumer publications

Given that there is a body of teaching from Hahnemann and later homoeopaths and an increasing amount of research supporting homoeopathy,¹⁹ it is interesting to view how writers have referred to the subject of potentization and succussion in publications aimed principally at consumers.

According to Marjorie Blackie:

Until one has investigated and tried homoeopathy for oneself, common sense, so-called,

seems to raise two insuperable obstacles to a belief in Homeopathy. The first is the fact that we use infinitesimal doses and the second that Hahnemann's conception of health and disease was, and is revolutionary.²⁰

Michael Weiner and Kathleen Goss, in *The Complete Book of Homeopathy*, discuss the minimum dose and potentization thus:

Probably the most difficult element of homeopathy for people to accept is its use of extremely small doses of the similar remedy. When Hahnemann first began prescribing on the basis of the Law of Similars, he used the large doses common in his time. He began experimenting with reduced doses, and he found that, although the undesirable violent aggravations of the symptoms were reduced, the remedies were still curative.²¹

Charles Wheeler adds to this statement:

The value, therefore of the infinitesimal doses of homeopathy rests on (clinical) evidence, and there is no lack of it or lack of opportunity for any enquirer to supply more.²²

In *The Family Guide to Homeopathy*, Andrew Lockie discusses controversy and proof, clinical trials, the effects of high dilutions, and the theories behind potentization.

It has been proposed that minute quantities of a remedy may act as a catalyst, a substance that speeds up the chemical workings of the body and so stimulates its innate healing powers. However, the extreme dilutions seem to preclude this.

It may be that physics, rather than chemistry, holds the answer. Evidence indicates that the structure of the solvent molecules may be electrochemically changed by succussion. The solvent molecules may be imprinted and 'remember' the vibratory properties of the original tincture. When the remedy is given to the patient, this 'memory' is communicated to the living system and stimulates the effect that we see.²³

Ullman reminds readers simply that

The sensitivity of an organism to small doses of certain substance is evident throughout nature,²⁴

while Jonas and Jacobs state

promising areas of investigation into the mechanism of action of homeopathy can be found in the fields of solution dynamics, bioelectromagnetics and chaos theory.²⁵

It is likely that the foregoing statements are going to be unacceptable to inquiring consumers in the future. Avogadro may not yet be a household name, but the inability to detect molecules of active material in homeopathic preparations with the analytical methods available today is worrying to many. Like our conventional medical colleagues, consumers are already seeking a more logical 'scientific' explanation for the effectiveness and efficacy of homeopathy. An understanding of potentization is central to this. Until such information becomes available, the idea is likely to remain a myth to many.

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