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Dominic Lawson: Can you tell the difference between homeopaths and witch doctors?

The answer is: witch doctors are not publicly funded within the NHS. Not so far, anyway

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Just what is it about the Royal Family and Homeopathy? The Prince of Wales is well known to be an advocate. The Queen also employs a homeopath and is patron of the Royal Homeopathic Hospital. Her father, King George V1, named one of his racehorses, Hypericum, after a homeopathic remedy, and Prince Charles says his own enthusiasm for the practice stems from his beloved grandmother, the Queen Mother.

Alternative medicine was possibly the only interest which Prince Charles shared with his first wife. I have personal experience of this: Diana, Princess of Wales, was godmother to our younger daughter and, when Domenica's gastro-intestinal reflux seemed unresponsive to conventional remedies, Diana insisted we took her to a "cranial osteopath". This man had a waiting list of many months, but one phone call from his most celebrated advocate had our daughter round to his rooms off Harley Street in short order. I won't forget the experience. As I saw the peculiarly agonised expressions on his face while he massaged Domenica's tiny skull, tears began rolling down my cheeks. These were not tears of sympathy for my daughter, or tears of joy as I witnessed the laying-on of hands. They were the tears that flow when one is desperately trying to suppress a fit of giggles at an inappropriate occasion.

If you surmise from this that I am not a great believer in alternative medicine you would be right' although I hope the article I wrote three days ago about the outrageous treatment of pregnant women by obstetricians demonstrates that I am not an uncritical admirer of the medical establishment. But on the matter of homeopathy - which this week emerged as part of the conflict between Prince Charles and conventional medicine -I am emphatically on the establishment's side.

When the practice was first developed by Samuel Hahnemann in the 18th century it was probably more in accord with Hippocrates' "First, do no harm" than much of the conventional medicine of the time, with its reliance on leeches, bloodletting and assorted other forms of purging the body's "ill humours". Hahnemann believed, as do his followers, that most illnesses were manifestations of a suppressed itch he called 'psora' - a kind of miasma, or evil spirit. His treatment was to find the substance which allegedly caused a particular type of disorder, and then to create a medicine by diluting that substance with water: most critical to success, however, was to create the maximum amount of dilution ("the law of infinitesimals"). Hence homeopaths believe - they really do - that the most effective remedy is one in which there is no longer a single molecule of the active ingredient in the water. However - please bear with me - the water has "a memory" of the active ingredient, and it is this which will cure the sufferer.

As the Australian Council Against Health Fraud remarks: "Strangely, the water offered as treatment does not remember the bladders it has been stored in, or the chemicals that may have come into contact with its molecules, or the other contents of the sewers it may have been in, or the cosmic radiation which has blasted through it." I suppose you might say that the medicinal water of the homeopath has a selective memory.

The idea that you can destroy or triumph over something by absorbing its essence goes back well before Hahnemann's official "discovery". As James Frazer demonstrated in *The Golden Bough*, our primitive forefathers believed that by eating the heart of their foes, they would conquer the enemy tribe for good. Frazer described this as "part of the system of sympathetic or homeopathic magic".

In fact "sympathy", in the modern sense of the word, is very much at the heart of homeopathy's grip on today's primitive believers. The average NHS consultation with a conventional doctor lasts not much over 6 minutes - indeed the doctor may not even look up from his notes before writing a prescription for some bog-standard mass-produced medicine. The homeopath will exude deep interest and concern for the uniquely suffering character of his patient. He or she will then recommend some tincture which is specifically created for your most extraordinarily interesting ailment.

The first British homeopathic site I found on an internet search was that of Linda Lloyd MCLHom. Linda explains that any homeopath "will take the time to listen to you, and treat you as a unique individual taking into account your emotional state". Nevertheless, Linda does not need to meet you to establish and treat your emotional and medical needs. Under her "telephone service" she declares, "it's good to talk, as the saying goes, and I take a warm and friendly approach ... then I get the remedies in the post to you within 24 to 48 hours. Normally you would have to pay £55 for your first appointment with me but I am offering this service for £45 - that's a very generous £10 discount." You certainly can't fault Linda's maths - or her commercial acuity: she does internet consultations, too.

This all helps to explain why, in the most authoritative double-blind meta-surveys, homeopathy has consistently failed to demonstrate more curative powers than placebos: homeopathy is itself a placebo. That also explains the wonderful remark by the Society of Homeopaths after The Lancet last year published a devastating multi-country survey on homeopathy: "It has been established beyond doubt and accepted by many researchers that the placebo-controlled randomised controlled trial is not a fitting research tool to test homeopathy." Naturally: how could placebos be better (or worse) than placebos?

As a matter of fact, I know and like a local GP who practices homeopathy. When he says that "placebo is one of the most significant forces in medicine" I agree with him. The fact that he genuinely believes in what he is saying to his patients is all part of the effect. Let us be fair to the homeopaths: they are at least using this effect to try to help people. There is, after all, such a thing as negative placebo: it's called voodoo.

My sympathies, however, are with the group of leading doctors who in response to Prince Charles' proselytising speech to the World Health Organisation last week, wrote a letter demanding that NHS trusts stop paying for alternative medicine - currently at a rate of £450m a year. For the lead signatory, the cancer specialist Professor Michael Baum, it is an affront that Herceptin should have to compete for public funding with "treatments" which by their very nature are only suitable for dealing with illnesses that are largely psychosomatic.

What, after all, is the real difference between homeopaths and witch doctors? The answer is: witch doctors are not publicly funded within the NHS. Not so far, anyway: Prince Charles hasn't got round to that - yet.

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