

Doctors warn of medical 'madness'

Criticism of homeopathy reaches new levels but its defenders say it has its place, writes Susan Pepperell.

A GROUP of doctors is taking a stand against the "madness" of homeopathy.

The doctors, led by Tauranga GP and Victoria University adjunct professor Shaun Holt, and including three UK-based medical professors, have written to the *New Zealand Medical Journal* calling on their colleagues to stop referring patients to homeopaths.

Their initiative follows a directive from the Medical Council last month outlining the standards expected of doctors if they practised complementary or alternative medicine.

The council did not oppose it if there were proven benefits for the patient, minimal risks and patients had made an informed choice.

But Holt, a long-term and vocal campaigner against homeopathy, said it has no benefit other than offering a placebo effect, is biologically implausible and "completely inconsistent with our understanding of medicine, biology, pharmacology and pathology".

He said most people do not know what it is and assume – mistakenly – it is some kind of "nice,

natural" mixture of diluted herbs.

Research published in the *NZ Medical Journal* in 2006 showed that 15% of GPs referred patients to homeopaths.

"I think it is wrong and I want them not to do it," Holt said.

He acknowledged it was a big call to make "to suggest one in eight of my colleagues are not practising medicine in the way they should".

However, he said homeopathy was anti-science and more than 90% of patients "don't know the madness involved".

Homeopaths used a method of testing known as "a proving" to demonstrate the effectiveness of their products.

Holt said homeopaths ask a group of "provers" to take the remedy and then describe their symptoms.

"It doesn't prove anything. A lot of people passionately believe in it but as a doctor I don't see how it can be compatible with medicine."

He was not against all alternative medicines and doesn't want to ban homeopathy. "I'd prefer to educate people so they can make their own decisions.

"The main argument is that people have tried it, and it works. But there are good reasons it seems to work."

One was the placebo effect, which Holt said was extremely powerful. "As doctors we should harness that, but that's another debate."

Although homeopathic remedies appeared to work, the body had a natural ability to heal itself.

"That's the beauty of scientific research, it takes out the placebo effect and the natural history."

Homeopaths are not regulated in New Zealand but a Council of Homeopaths claims to represent more than 200 practitioners and provides a "stamp of approval" for them. Its members include GPs and vets, according to its website.

Council co-president Susanna Shelton said Holt and his colleagues assumed people who consulted homeopathic doctors or homeopaths were naive and uninformed. This attitude was patronising and contrary to the experience of its members, she said.

"The crux of the matter is that homeopathy has proven itself as a





HOW IT WORKS

Homeopathy is based on a premise that substances causing symptoms in a healthy person can, when diluted, cure the same problems in a sick person. Homeopathic remedies that have gained widespread media attention include a product called Saturn which was made by shining a telescope at the planet Saturn and reflecting the light onto a powdered milk sugar. It supposedly helped treat itching, numbness, hand sweating and co-ordination problems. Another product known as Berlin Wall was made from diluting part of the now dismantled Berlin Wall.

Auckland GP Kerry Lamb uses homeopathy, mainly on children.

Photo: Gillian O'Neill

safe, effective form of treatment for over 200 years. The benefits of homeopathy can hardly be attributed to placebo when newborns, unconscious patients and dairy cows respond positively."

Auckland GP Kerry Lamb prescribes homeopathic remedies in her practice, mainly for children.

She said they were generally used for treating viral illnesses. "It's acute homeopathy rather than constitutional."

Lamb said she believed Holt was taking a very hard line and she had found homeopathy a "very handy thing to have up my sleeve".

"A lot of parents like the option of an alternative treatment for children. It's complementary and parents appreciate not having to resort to drugs."

She also said that many medications were not particularly effective for children and the remedies did not cause side-effects.

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