Homeopathy and Its Founder: Views of a British Researcher

By ACSH Staff — October 1, 1999

Homeopathy is a system of so-called energy medicine developed by German physician Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843). Over the years proponents of homeopathy have put forward various theories concerning homeopathy's alleged ability to cure diverse maladies, but there is little agreement, even among these proponents, as to how homeopathic products might work.

To question homeopathy is, by association, to question an impressive wealth of well-documented personal experiences attesting to its alleged effectiveness. While feelings and personal experience can sometimes lead one to the truth of a matter, the old maxim that our senses often deceive us is acknowledged and allowed for not only in biomedical research but in all fields of sensible inquiry.

The Formative Years of Homeopathy

In 1774, Samuel Hahnemann, a 19-year-old with very little money, left his home, in Meissen, Germany, for Leipzig University to study medicine. Although he tried to earn money as a translator, making ends meet was very difficult for him. On the brink of starvation, he was introduced to an opulent Transylvanian baron, Samuel Brukenthal, the head of the Madgeburg Freemasons' Lodge. Hahnemann was initiated into the Lodge in Hermannstadt, Transylvania, in October 1777. He quickly came to esteem the many itinerant "teachers of mysteries" who were indoctrinating the Lodges in such matters as alchemy and spiritism. In *Samuel Hahnemann His Life and Work* (Jain Publishers, 1971), Richard Haehl hinted at the depth of Hahnemann's involvement in the Lodge: "He advanced beyond [vitalism and the naturalism of Schelling and Hegel] to spiritism and for a while lost his way in occultism." In *Life and Letters of Samuel Hahnemann* (Jain Publishers, 1921), Thomas Bradford gave a much less guarded account of the time Hahnemann spent in the service of Herr Brukenthal: "It was in these quiet, scholarly days that Hahnemann acquired that extensive and diverse knowledge of ancient literature and of occult sciences, of which he afterwards proved himself to be a master."

In 1790, Hahnemann, now a physician, was translating a manuscript that ascribed cinchona bark's ability to cure malarial fever to the bark's astringency. Hahnemann noted, quite correctly, that substances much more astringent than cinchona had no effect whatsoever on fever, and he concluded that cinchona relieves fever in some other way. Hahnemann ingested some cinchona and decided that it had had feverlike effects on him. He inferred from this experience that cinchona could have effects identical to malarial-fever symptoms and decided that this was the property responsible for its curing malarial fever. In the introduction to the first edition of his book on homeopathy, Hahnemann stated: "To obtain a quick and lasting cure, choose for every attack of illness a substance which can produce a similar malady to the one it is to cure. . . . [L]ike cures
like."

In fact, it is because cinchona contains quinine that it can reduce fever. Although this discovery was well publicized during Hahnemann's lifetime, it did not render homeopathy's foundational theory obsolete. Modern-day books on homeopathy praise Hahnemann's "experiments" unreservedly, without so much as alluding to the many works published during Hahnemann's development of homeopathy that contradicted his claims. For example, a Dr. Schwartz of the Board of Health, who attempted to re-create Hahnemann's alleged findings concerning cinchona, wrote: "Cinchona, even in the preparation advocated by Hahnemann, did not cause fever in either healthy people or animals." Indeed, Hahnemann's alleged findings have never been scientifically replicated.

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Hahnemann continued to "experiment," with various substances, not only on himself, but also on his family and his willing students. Hahnemann's assertion that 122 "symptoms" had resulted from his ingestion of cinchona is properly contextualized in his book Fragmenta de Viribus, in which he attributed no fewer than 174 "symptoms" to the ingestion of green peppers! Eat a green pepper and note whatever "symptoms" arise. Forecast: none!

It is plain that Hahnemann was fabricating support for the theory he espoused. Biographer Richard Haehl declared that Fragmenta de Viribus demonstrates "extensive observation and a fearless love of truth." A testament to extensive observation this book may be but a demonstration of a fearless love of truth it certainly is not!

Having amassed voluminous pseudo-knowledge by pairing many specific vile substances and particular diseases whose symptoms most resembled the effects he attributed to those substances, Hahnemann set up shop as the original homeopath. He would begin his consultations by putting wearisomely numerous questions to the patient. The replies would contribute to his building a picture of the patient's condition a picture based exclusively on these replies, the patient's appearance, and Hahnemann's supposedly God-given intuition. For example, if the patient had a gray pallor, was sweating profusely, and said that he or she suffered from abdominal cramps, Hahnemann would in effect look up "gray pallor," "sweating," and "abdominal cramps" in his tome; use cross-references to narrow down possible remedies; and thus decide that strychnine a toxic alkaloid was the ideal cure for the patient's condition.

If it is ingested in significant quantities, strychnine will indeed cause sweating and severe abdominal cramps. Hahnemann's original records on his patients detail his prescribing many noxious substances according to the doctrine of similia similibus curentur ("like cures like"). For stomach pains he regularly prescribed quarter-ounce "doses" of mercury. He instructed one poor soul to take half an ounce of sulfuric acid in the morning and another half-ounce later that day. A purported healing system that Hahnemann asserted God had revealed to him was having devilish effects on his patients, who were "dropping like flies." Although similia similibus curentur was a conspicuous failure, Hahnemann merely conceded that the theory might need some adjustment.
The Birth of "Less Is More"

To adjust the "like cures like" theory, Hahnemann reverted to his Masonic and occult mixing-and-shaking rituals. He would, for example, add 99 drops of alcohol to one drop of a "mother tincture" (the filtrate of a strong alcohol or water solution of the basic substance), shake this mixture vigorously (thus supposedly potentizing it, i.e., making its alleged latent power available), add 99 drops of water to one drop of the "1c" mixture, shake the mixture to make a 2c mixture, and so on. Hahnemann's diaries of his less-is-more period include much alchemic and astrologic symbolism. Hahnemann often would work long into the night, mixing and shaking, mixing and shaking, scraping, cooking and stirring. While his unusual dilution procedure was conveniently serving to decrease the toxicity of his powders, it allegedly was increasing tremendously their ability to cure.

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Thus did "like cures like" and "less is more" come to constitute the cornerstone of what Hahnemann called his "rational healing art."

By far, most of the homeopathic "remedies" sold in the pharmacies and health food stores of the United Kingdom are 6c preparations. It behooves us to grasp how little of the homeopathic counterpart to an active ingredient a 6c "remedy" contains.

The homeopathic alleged remedy for the common cold (for which there is no known cure) is an onion-based preparation, Allium Cepa. A 6c onion concentration would result if one filled Wembley Stadium (to the roof) with water and added one drop of an onion mother tincture. A 12c onion "concentration" in a homeopathic pill is equivalent to that which would result if one added a single drop of onion mother tincture to a body of water the size of the Atlantic Ocean.

It was with such empty "remedies" that Hahnemann's patients improved, and Hahnemann was gaining a reputation as a rare doctor one whose patients actually recovered. Hahnemann was uninterested in arguments disparaging his mystical concoctions; to him, that his patients recovered was proof enough that homeopathy was effective.

How homeopathic preparations without even a trace of an active ingredient appear effective ties in to what may well be homeopathy's only contribution to the advancement of medicine. This decidedly indirect contribution is described in The March of Medicine (McDonald & Co., 1963):

> However we may judge Hahnemann's theory, one thing must be admitted. It led to a decisive change in medical thought. Clear-headed doctors realised that a minimum dose of an ineffectual substance, such as homoeopaths used, was tantamount to giving no treatment. If the sick recovered all the same and this could not be disputed it must be a matter of self-healing. Homoeopathic treatment in other words, no treatment was often far better.

There is absolutely no scientific evidence that homeopathy has any objective salutary effects on conditions that are not self-limited (i.e., that do not have an inherently limited course). In other
words, persons who recover from a nonpsychologic, nonpsychosomatic disorder after they have taken a homeopathic preparation are those who would have recovered without taking it. The placebo effect and that most diseases short-circuit themselves are almost certainly responsible for virtually all of homeopathy's apparent therapeutic successes. Alas, patients in distress seldom accept nontreatment unless they believe it is treatment.

**Homeopathy in the United Kingdom**

Registered homeopaths in the U.K. have been estimated at 1,200. According to some observers, about as many nonregistered homeopaths are in gainful and quite uninterrupted practice. The London Homoeopathic Hospital which is the largest of the four homeopathic hospitals in the U.K. and offers diverse unconventional health "services" sees 500 patients a week on average. And increasingly, conventional hospitals in the U.K. have been demonstrating a favorable interest in referring patients to homeopaths. The total European expenditure on homeopathic products in 1998 well exceeded one billion U.S. dollars.

Some critics of homeopathy write off its principles as nonsensical, yet cite the above figures to justify homeopathy as a harmless contributor to good economic health. Undoubtedly homeopathy is benefiting the European economy. In my opinion, however, irrational beliefs even misbeliefs as seemingly insignificant as those concerning the cause and cure of piles are always dangerously corrupting.

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Prince Charles, who could become the next British monarch, is a major voice in the U.K.'s alternative health movement. A letter from him was published on the front page of an October 1997 edition of *The London Daily Telegraph*, under the headline "Science and Homoeopathy must work in harmony." In it he stated:

> In recent years, there has been an enormous growth in the use of complementary medicine not only in Great Britain but also in Europe, the U.S. and other parts of the world. More and more people are turning to homoeopathy, herbal medicine, acupuncture, osteopathy and a wide range of other treatments. . . . The goal we must work towards is an integrated healthcare system in which all the knowledge, experience and wisdom accumulated in different ways, at different times and in different cultures is effectively deployed to prevent or alleviate human suffering.

In my view, the above statement, which has been extensively publicized, is a testament to the horror of uncritical thinking and its many manifestations.

In a commentary on some of the basic causes of social problems, W. Deutscher made a statement relevant to the status of homeopathy in the U.K.: "We concentrate on consistency without much concern of what it is we are being consistent about, or whether we are consistently right or wrong. As a consequence, we have been learning a great deal about how to follow an incorrect cause
with the maximum of precision."

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