Why Homeopathy Matters to U.S. Health Care

By Dr. Peter Fisher, MD

Homeopathy is a 200-year-old system of medicine used by nearly 250 thousand physicians and over 500 million people worldwide — making it one of the most popular forms of integrative medicine. It is based on the concept of “treating like with like” (in Latin *similia similibus curentur*); homeopathy stimulates and directs the body’s self-healing mechanisms or homeostasis.

Scientific skepticism toward homeopathy often arises from its use of highly dilute medicines, and there is a substantial body of research on this issue. A recent review of basic science research on highly dilute homeopathic medicines found 98 replicated experiments with over 70 percent positive. Methods used to prepare homeopathic medicines are remarkably like cutting-edge nanotechnology, and there is growing evidence that nanoparticles play a crucial role in the action of homeopathy.

Why does homeopathy matter to America?

Data from the federal National Health Interview Survey analysed by a team at Harvard University show that around 7 million Americans use homeopathy with steady growth. Users tend to be female, highly educated and pursue healthy lifestyles. They use it primarily for upper respiratory and ear problems and consider it more effective than nutritional supplements. The demographics of users in France and Germany are similar although use is more widespread in those countries.

Polypharmacy (the use of multiple drugs), particularly in the elderly, is a major challenge to modern physicians. Opiate analgesics (painkillers), psychotropic drugs (including tranquilizers, antidepressants and sleeping tablets) and antibiotics are widely overused. The overuse of antibiotics has caused a massive global crisis of antimicrobial resistance, and there is strong research evidence suggesting that the integration of homeopathy into medical practice would reduce the need for many of these hazardous drugs.

Homeopathic research

The research literature offers preclinical and clinical evidence in support of the effectiveness of homeopathic medicines in treating individuals with a wide range of common conditions.

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Homeopathy shows historical, observational, and randomized clinical trial evidence of good outcomes, greater safety, patient acceptance, accessibility and cost-savings. Homeopathy is often used “to treat the patient, not the disease,” strengthening host defenses and resilience rather than killing microbes or blocking pathophysiological processes.

**Comparative effectiveness research**

Comparative effectiveness research examines the results of treatments in real-world situations as opposed to the artificial conditions often imposed in randomized controlled trials. It compares outcomes in groups of patients (known as cohorts) receiving different treatments. There are several such studies of homeopathy, comparing outcomes in various groups of patients attending conventional family physicians, and family physicians who integrate homeopathy in their practice, including those below.

A multinational comparative effectiveness study led by the American physician Dr. David Riley involved 30 doctors at six clinical sites in four countries treating patients with acute respiratory problems. **Response at 14 days was 82.6 percent for homeopathy compared to 68 percent for conventional treatment. The rate of adverse events for conventional treatment was 22.3 percent, versus 7.8 percent for homeopathy.** A replication of this study included 1,577 patients of whom 857 received homeopathic and 720 conventional treatment; improvement was significantly faster with homeopathy.4,5

Trichard et al. compared “homeopathic strategy” against “antibiotic strategy” in routine medical practice in the management of recurrent acute rhino-pharyngitis in 499 children aged between 18 months and 4 years.6,7 **Family physicians using homeopathy had significantly better results in terms of clinical effectiveness, complications, parents’ quality of life and time lost from work, for lower cost to social security.**

Witt et al. compared homeopathic and conventional family physicians’ outcomes in chronic diagnoses commonly treated in general practice (adults – headache, low back pain, depression, insomnia, sinusitis; children – atopic asthma, dermatitis, rhinitis).8,9 493 patients were treated by 101 homeopathic and 59 conventional family physicians. The patients treated by the two groups of physicians were generally similar. **The conclusion was that patients who sought homeopathic treatment had better outcomes at similar cost.**

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The largest comparative effectiveness study of homeopathy published to date is the EPI3 study. A nationwide study in France, coordinated by the Department of Pharmacoepidemiology at the University of Bordeaux, it included 6,379 patients from 804 medical practices. It compared treatment outcomes for patients attending conventional, homeopathic, and mixed practice family physicians in musculoskeletal conditions, upper respiratory tract infection, sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression in terms of clinical benefit, medical care and medication, adverse effects, and loss of therapeutic opportunity. Patients did not differ between groups except for the chronicity of their illness, which was greater in the homeopathic group. The authors concluded that patients treated by homeopathic physicians showed a similar clinical progression but took about half the amount of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) compared to conventionally-treated patients, with fewer NSAID-related adverse events and no loss of therapeutic opportunity. 10

Another study in the EPI3 series yielded an analogous result, showing that patients who consult family physicians certified in homeopathy used significantly less antibiotics and antipyretic/anti-inflammatory drugs for upper respiratory tract infections than those who attended family physicians who prescribe only conventional medications, with similar outcomes. This finding is of considerable public health importance since antimicrobial resistance is now a major global problem. One of its main causes is overuse of antibiotics for upper respiratory tract infections.11

Cost-effectiveness

Economic analysis of EPI3 data looked at three types of cost: consultation, prescription and total costs. Overall health expenditure was 20 percent less for patients consulting homeopathic family physicians in France compared to conventional family physicians ($78.70 US vs. $98.91 US). The lower cost of medical prescriptions for homeopathic family physicians was partially offset by higher consultation costs. Homeopathic physicians prescribed far fewer potentially hazardous drugs including psychotropics, antibiotics and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.12

In all comparative effectiveness studies of homeopathy, its integration into health care resulted in better outcomes for patients with improved safety. Those that included cost-effectiveness analysis showed no additional cost or reduced costs.

Safety of homeopathy

Physician and consumer confidence in the safety of homeopathy is justified. There is no evidence that homeopathic medicines cause serious or long-lasting harm. A systematic review of the safety of homeopathy, which included a comprehensive search of the English-language literature and...
enquiries with regulatory authorities, including FDA, concluded: “Homeopathic medicines may provoke adverse effects, but these are generally mild and transient; there are cases of 'mistaken identity' where herbal medicines were [erroneously] described as homeopathic. The main risks associated with homeopathy are indirect, relating to the prescriber rather than the medicine.”13

**Basic research: biological models**

There is a substantial body of research in homeopathy using animal models, human cells, plants, and other organisms. Of these studies, 89 percent reported at least one positive result. Animals were the most often used model system (371), followed by plants (201), human material (92), bacteria and viruses (37), and fungi (32).14 One of the hallmarks of high quality science is replication. A recent review of biochemical, immunological, botanical, cell biological and zoological experiments on homeopathic dilutions found 98 replicated experiments with over 70 percent positive.15

**Basic research: physical and chemical methods**

Homeopathic medicines are made from plants, animals (or parts of animals) and other substances serially diluted and vigorously agitated during the manufacturing process. Twelve independent research laboratories in the U.S., France, Italy, Russia, and India have now found that homeopathic medicines studied contain various nanostructures, including source, silica, and gas nanobubbles heterogeneously dispersed in colloidal solution.16,17,18,19 This work suggests that homeopathic medicines, like modern engineered nanoparticles, act by modulating the allostatic stress response network (allostasis is the process of restoring a stable internal environment), including cytokines, oxidative stress and heat shock proteins.20,21

**Clinical trials of homeopathy**

There are at least 1,223 clinical trials of homeopathy.22 Additionally, four systematic review/meta-analyses of homeopathy for all conditions have been published.23,24,25 Of these, three reached a

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22 http://archiv.carstens-stiftung.de/core-hom/login.php


positive conclusion: that there is good evidence that homeopathy is clinically effective. The exception is the review by Shang et al. This meta-analysis was controversial, particularly because its conclusions were based on only eight clinical trials whose identity was not disclosed until several months after the publication of the paper, precluding informed examination of its results. The only undisputed conclusion of this paper is that clinical trials of homeopathy are of higher quality than matched trials of conventional medicine. Of 110 clinical trials, each of homeopathy and conventional medicine, 21 trials of homeopathy but only 9 trials of conventional medicine were of higher quality.

A leading Swedish medical researcher remarked: “To conclude that homeopathy lacks clinical effect, more than 90 percent of the available clinical trials had to be disregarded. Alternatively, flawed statistical methods had to be applied.” Higher quality equates to less risk of bias. Mathie et al. analyzed randomized clinical trials of individualized homeopathy, showing that the highest quality trials yielded positive results.

**Conclusion**

Homeopathy is geographically widespread and increasing in popularity. Clinical research and syntheses of such research show it to be safe and effective for a range of conditions. Integrating homeopathy in health care systems is associated with benefits including improved outcomes, less use of drugs including antibiotics, and cost benefits.

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**About the Author**

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The American Institute of Homeopathy is America's oldest medical society. To learn more visit: www.homeopathyusa.org.

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