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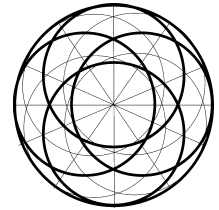
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Why homeopathy is unethical

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As a form of medicine, my view is that homeopathy does not work and cannot work. It is beyond the scope of this contribution to present a detailed scientific critique of homeopathy. Such critical analyses have been made extensively elsewhere, and are well known.^{1–4} Suffice it to say that homeopathy fails on grounds of scientific plausibility; a molecule can have no therapeutic effect if it has been removed by dilution; the concept *similia similibus curantur* has no scientific or logical basis; and the notion of a yet-to-be-discovered scientific law to ‘explain’ homeopathy amounts only to *ad hoc* speculation. Concomitant with its scientific implausibility, it is not surprising that clinical trials have failed to provide convincing evidence that homeopathy is effective in treating any medical condition.

Given that homeopathy cannot possibly work, a number of serious ethical issues arise where homeopathy is offered to patients, taught to students or otherwise promulgated. These ethical issues are set out below.

Homeopathy risks patients’ health

Where a patient requires effective medicine, but instead is treated with homeopathy, that patient’s health may be at risk. Thus, practitioners who offer homeopathy instead of effective medicine are behaving unethically. It is doubtless the case that some homeopathic practitioners, including those who are also medically qualified, may offer conventional treatments or referrals alongside homeopathy; for example, where a disorder is serious. In such cases, when effective medicine is employed, the purpose of additional homeopathy is questionable. However, evidence exists to suggest that some ‘CAM’ practitioners, including some homeopaths, choose to act as proponents of their creed, rather than as sources of reliable advice and treatment.^{5,6} Such conduct risks failing to

provide patients with effective medicine, thus causing harm through omission; this behaviour is ethically unacceptable.

This is a problem of international scale; homeopathy is one of the foremost ‘alternative’ therapeutic systems, which has been integrated into the health-care systems of several countries, including India, Mexico, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.^{7,8} The fact that millions of citizens worldwide are exposed to homeopathy means that the damage to health through omission is likely to be of substantial magnitude. Moreover, in some developing nations homeopathy has been promoted and used as a treatment for serious diseases, such as tuberculosis and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection.⁹ From an ethical perspective, the promotion of homeopathy as a supposed treatment for serious illnesses is deplorable.

In the West, a number of cases have been documented in which individuals have died from being treated only with ineffective ‘alternative’ forms of medicine, including homeopathy;¹⁰ despite the availability of effective (conventional) medicine. While some of these cases have been due to an insistence on the part of the patient to persist with an ‘alternative’ approach (against medical advice), advocates of homeopathy must bear some responsibility for generally promoting the false notion that homeopathy works. And this is potentially an escalating problem, because laypeople now have previously unparalleled and increasing access to medical information via the Internet.

Given that homeopathy cannot work, all pro-homeopathy information is inherently invalid; thus, websites prepared by homeopaths and their professional bodies may only serve to spread misinformation. For instance, many pro-homeopathic websites, including those of prominent professional homeopathic associations, exhibit a general pattern of presenting isolated positive findings from cherry picked

homeopathy trials.^{11,12} It is well known that patients increasingly rely on the Internet, and therefore vulnerable individuals are being increasingly exposed to unsubstantiated claims in favour of homeopathy.

Other than in cases where a homeopathic practitioner has grossly misadvised a patient (for example, telling a patient that homeopathy is effective against cancer), or has failed to refer a seriously ill patient for conventional health care, competent adults who persist with homeopathy must take some responsibility for their plight. However, this is not the case for patients who are unable to give informed consent. In this regard it is troubling that homeopathic remedies are frequently used in children and occasionally in mentally incompetent adults, such as those with dementia.¹³⁻¹⁵ Any harm arising from failure to employ effective medicine in such groups is ethically abhorrent.

Deaths arising from a failure to treat with effective medicine are, in developed societies, relatively rare and fairly easy to document; but this is not the case with lower-level forms of medical harm, such as the impact on health arising from simply delaying a visit to one's (conventional) physician, while persisting for a time with homeopathy. Thus, the extent of non-lethal harm arising from homeopathy cannot be quantified; but it is certainly likely to be much greater than the number of actual deaths. Of course, plenty of iatrogenic harm is caused by conventional medicine. However, such harm is not necessarily ethically problematic, because risks and side-effects can and should be balanced by clinical efficacy. By contrast, all harm attributable to homeopathy (through omission), ranging from death to minor morbidity, is ethically unacceptable because no clinical benefits exist to balance the harm.

Homeopathy wastes healthcare resources

Because homeopathy is ineffective, expenditure on homeopathic services represents a waste of resources. The imperative to use limited public funds on the most effective forms of health care renders expenditure on homeopathy ethically unacceptable. In the context of private individuals, when patients are led to believe that homeopathy works, this is bound to lead to personal expenditure on homeopathic services and products. Such misinformed spending of private resources is ethically problematic. This is particularly so where impoverished individuals or families waste their limited resources on homeopathy.

However, it can be argued that, because homeopathic preparations contain no active ingredients and therefore are (or should be) cheap, homeopathy has some merit on the grounds of low cost. For example, the British Homeopathic Association has objected to closure of homeopathic services in Tunbridge Wells by claiming that 'at an estimated cost of £400 per patient,

this was a cheap service for chronically ill patients'.¹⁶ But the argument for low cost is flawed, because treatment with ineffective medicine is equivalent to no treatment. Therefore, any expenditure on homeopathy can only be a waste of resources, irrespective of the relative costs involved. Moreover, homeopathy in reality does not come cheap: homeopathic hospitals, clinics and consulting time must be paid for. Such expenditure is least ethically defensible in the context of publicly funded health care. For example, it is highly regrettable that the UK's NHS chooses to fund four homeopathic hospitals.

When, inevitably, no clinical benefit is obtained from homeopathy, unless the condition resolves spontaneously, the patient is likely to return to conventional medicine. In this way, treatment must be paid for twice; firstly for the homeopathic treatment, which cannot possibly work; and secondly for conventional treatment, which generally does work. Of course, there are many medical conditions for which no effective treatment exists. But this provides no valid grounds for using homeopathy. It is better to discuss with such patients why there may be little that can be given to effectively treat their problems, rather than expend valuable resources on ineffective homeopathic remedies.

It is unethical to use homeopathy as a placebo

Accepting the premise that it is impossible for homeopathic preparations to exert direct physiological effects leaves room for the claim that homeopathy has value as a placebo-based therapy. While it is true that placebo effects can benefit patients, the homeopathy-as-placebo argument is fatally flawed on logical and ethical grounds. Firstly, it is notable that the founder of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, did not posit that his system of medicine rested on patient suggestibility (or what we now call placebo effects). To the contrary, Hahnemann clearly believed that his specially diluted preparations were able to cause physiological changes in the patient. In keeping with Hahnemann's teachings, modern homeopathy also maintains that direct physiological effects occur, as evidenced by numerous published works on claimed mechanisms of action for homeopathic preparations. Thus, practitioners who anticipate only placebo effects from their prescribed homeopathic remedies are acting in bad faith. At least in terms of personal integrity, this is ethically problematic.

A wider ethical problem arises from the fact that homeopathy-as-placebo entails lying to the patient. Patients expect their prescribed homeopathic preparations to have actual effects. Strong placebo effects depend upon such beliefs. An argument could be made in favour of hoodwinking patients in order to

facilitate a placebo response; however, such an argument would be highly paternalistic, and would conflict with the ethical imperative to facilitate patient autonomy. Moreover, the notion of 'informed consent' – an ethical cornerstone of modern health care – demands the provision of full information to the patient. Thus, causing patients to believe a falsehood (i.e. that homeopathic preparations can directly alter physiological functioning), amounts to a denial of informed consent, which is unethical.

Of course, many homeopaths undoubtedly believe that their remedies are effective beyond placebo effects. Such belief may be categorised as quasi-religious, since it does not depend on empirical evidence or rational thinking. Such homeopaths, as true believers, avoid the charge of acting in bad faith. However, such practitioners are still behaving unethically because in a medical (as opposed to religious) context, simply acting in good faith is not enough. All healthcare professionals have a positive ethical duty to ensure that the treatment of patients is based upon sound theory and evidence. Accordingly, this presents a most profound ethical problem for homeopathy, considering its extremely weak scientific and logical basis.

Homeopathy is not necessarily holistic

Homeopathy may be favoured as a form of holistic health care, in that the homeopath may seek to treat the patient as a whole, in his or her emotional, familial and societal context; as opposed to focusing only on the symptoms or underlying pathology. In health care in general, a broadly holistic approach probably benefits the patient, although it also carries a risk of medicalising the patient's problems and creating over-dependence on the physician. However, the benefits of holism cannot be claimed as unique to homeopathy. Good conventional health care values elements of holistic practice, such as taking time to talk with patients. By contrast, although homeopathy (like any form of medicine) can be holistic, in practice it is frequently not so at all: for example, one struggles to detect any holism in the now ubiquitous supply of homeopathic remedies to the public via the high street pharmacy shelf or online drugstore.

Promotion of homeopathy is unethical

The core ethical problems described above apply whenever homeopathy is used. The magnitude of the overall negative effect will be proportionate to the extent to which homeopathy is practised. Specifically, it is ethically desirable to have as few homeopaths, and as few patients treated with homeopathy, as possible. Accordingly, actions that promote homeopathy, and thus increase the quantity of homeopathic practice, are to be deprecated. In this respect,

moral censure should be directed not only at the practitioners of homeopathy, but also towards all other agents who, whether acting as ideological proponents or motivated by other factors, act such as to promote homeopathy.

Thus, when major healthcare agencies, such as the NHS (UK) or the NIH (US), acquiesce (as they both have done) in the face of pressures to fund homeopathy, the amount of it being practised will increase, which is regrettable on the ethical grounds set out above. But the problem extends further; when influential and respected agencies appear to support homeopathy, it is inevitable that laypeople will frequently make the mistake of assuming that homeopathy is a valid form of medicine.

Similar ethical issues arise when universities and colleges offer homeopathy education. Several degree-level programmes majoring in homeopathy, or including substantive components thereof, have been launched in the UK, USA and elsewhere.^{17,18} The students concerned are at risk of indoctrination because these courses are not designed to provide analytical or critical study, but instead, serve to advocate homeopathic theory and provide training in the clinical application of homeopathy.^{19,20} But the ethical problems do not stop at student indoctrination; universities are seen by the populace as guardians of reliable knowledge and therefore the greater the number of university homeopathy courses, the greater will be the perceived respectability of homeopathy.

Thus, the actions of healthcare or educational professionals can operate to increase the public acceptability of homeopathy. Such actions are ethically unacceptable because it is inevitable that they will lead to people being misinformed and misled. In turn, a misled public will create increased demand for homeopathic consultations and prescriptions, thus increasing the quantity of harm and waste arising from this ineffective form of medicine.²¹

The application of scientific knowledge and methodology has gradually and painstakingly moved medicine away from primitive and folk-based modalities towards increasingly safe and efficacious approaches. Such efforts and progress by many scientists, physicians and educators is ethically laudable. By contrast, homeopathy represents a stark form of anti-scientific delusion, running counter to genuine medical progress. It seems likely that an inverse correlation exists between (a) societal acceptance of implausible modalities such as homeopathy, and (b) societal commitment to science-based medicine. Thus, although the magnitude of the problem is impossible to quantify, support for homeopathy is likely to slow down the general rate of progress in medicine. This likelihood provides a final and important ethical reason for concluding that homeopathy is deeply and intrinsically unethical.

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