



HOMEOPATHY

A brief history of homeopathy

Homeopathy is a system of healing developed in the late 1700s by the German physician Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) and his colleagues. In Hahnemann's time, the practice of medicine was based on an ancient Greek theory in which disease was believed to be caused by an imbalance of the four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile). These humours were thought to be fluids contained within the body. An imbalance of body conditions (hot, cold, dry, wet) was also believed to contribute to disease. To return balance and health to the body, physicians treated symptoms with "opposites." For example, fever was seen as an excess of blood and heat because feverish patients were flushed and hot. Blood-letting was believed to cool the body and restore its balance. Hahnemann was understandably distressed by such practices, because medical treatments were often worse than the diseases they were supposed to cure.

Hahnemann is said to have invented homeopathy after he had taken a dose of cinchona bark — the treatment for malaria — as an experiment. He developed symptoms very much like those of malaria: fever, chills, shakes. He repeated the experiment, on himself and on his patients, using different substances. He matched his patients' symptoms to the effects of the substances given and saw his patients improve. This experience led Hahnemann to develop his Law of Similars.

Principles of homeopathy

The Law of Similars is often summed up as "like cures like." In other words, illness can be cured when treated with substances that, if taken by healthy people, produce symptoms similar to those of disease. Hahnemann and his colleagues went on to develop a healing system they called homeopathy (from the Greek words *homoios*, meaning similar, and *pathos* meaning suffering). They referred to the conventional medicine of their time as allopathy (from *allos* meaning opposite, and *pathos* meaning suffering) because symptoms were treated with opposites.

Another basic tenet of homeopathy developed by its founders is called the Law of Infinitesimals. This principle says that the smaller the dose of a medication, the more powerful are its effects. The homeopathic treatments are made stronger by a series of dilutions and succussions. For example, one part of a medicinal substance is mixed with 99 parts of alcohol and distilled water and succussed (shaken vigorously) many times. Then one part of this solution is diluted with another 99 parts of alcohol and water and shaken again. The procedure is repeated as many times as necessary. Substances that cannot be dissolved are finely ground and mixed with powdered lactose (milk sugar) in the same 1:99 proportions, and then diluted and succussed. Remedies are labelled with a combination of Roman and Arabic numerals. For example,

- 3X means the original substance has been diluted to 1 part in 1,000 (1/1000)



- 4X = 1 part in 10,000 (1/10,000)
- 3C = 1 part in one million (1/1,000,000)

Some homeopathic remedies may be diluted to the extent that only a trace amount of the original substance remains. Others may be so dilute that not even a single molecule of the substance is left.

Homeopathy in practice

Practitioners of homeopathy (homeopaths) believe that symptoms are evidence of the body's efforts to defend and heal itself. Furthermore, they see symptoms as unique to each individual. That is, even though two patients have the same symptoms, the symptoms can be expressed to different degrees or caused by different factors, which may be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or a combination of these. In essence, homeopathy aims to treat the whole person, not the disease.

Diagnosis

In order to discover the cause behind the symptoms, homeopaths carry out very detailed interviews with their patients. The first consultation often takes 45 minutes or more. The homeopath asks the patient many questions, which at first may not seem related to the patient's symptoms. Detailed notes are taken during the interview, and the homeopath may consult *repertories* (dictionaries of symptoms and the substances that cause or cure them) to diagnose the problem. Consulting books called *materia medicas*, which are encyclopedias of homeopathic remedies and their effects, may then help the homeopath select the appropriate treatment.

Treatments

Homeopathic medicines are developed through tests called provings. In these provings, healthy people volunteer to take repeated doses of remedies until they experience a reaction. Both the original and the diluted forms of the remedy may be tested.

Volunteers record their symptoms or reactions in daily diaries and take part in detailed interviews with the homeopath.

Since symptoms are seen as the body's attempt to cure itself, homeopathic treatments are prescribed to help that process. Remedies are not designed to treat or suppress symptoms.

If a patient does not respond to the prescribed treatment, the dose may be changed, or a different treatment may be substituted. Some homeopaths may adjust the dose or treatment at any time, while others prefer to wait a month or more before making any changes.

An HIV-positive person who uses a variety of conventional and complementary therapies recommends that homeopathic remedies should not be taken with or stored near garlic, mint, or tea tree oil. Furthermore, homeopathic remedies should be taken at least an hour — if not two hours — apart from medications containing garlic, mint, or tea tree oil.

Over-the-counter (OTC) homeopathic medicines

Many pharmacies and health-food stores stock homeopathic remedies for a variety of common conditions. These are often called complexes and are made from successive dilutions of several substances. These remedies are available without a prescription or consultation with a homeopath. Since the homeopathic approach relies so heavily on detailed interviews with patients, the value of these OTC remedies is questionable in relation to homeopathic principles and practice.

Homeopathy and conventional medicine

It is difficult to subject homeopathy to scientific scrutiny because its principles conflict with the basic laws of physics, chemistry, and pharmacology. Although there have been hundreds of clinical trials of homeopathic remedies, the results of most of these studies do not support the use of homeopathy.



As a result, most medical doctors scorn homeopathy and regard homeopathic remedies as useless but harmless since they are so dilute. However, a recent article in the medical journal *The Lancet* concluded that the effects of homeopathy could not be attributed to the placebo effect and urged further clinical study.

Homeopaths may counter this argument by asserting that scientists often don't know the exact mechanism of action of conventional drugs. Furthermore, from the homeopathic viewpoint, conventional medications may mask true symptoms. If symptoms are repressed or modified, it may be more difficult to make the correct diagnosis and prescribe the appropriate homeopathic treatment. As a result, some homeopaths may recommend that patients stop their conventional treatments.

In short, homeopathy and modern medicine are very different approaches to treating illness and maintaining good health. As a result, some people may find it difficult to integrate both approaches in managing their health.

Finding a homeopathic practitioner

Homeopaths are not regulated in any province in Canada, but several Canadian colleges offer three-year training courses in homeopathy. The cost of an initial consultation with a qualified homeopath can vary, running from about \$80 to \$250, and follow-up sessions are generally much less expensive.

For help in finding a homeopathic practitioner in your area, contact

North American Society of Homeopaths (NASH)
1122 E Pike St., Suite 1122
Seattle, WA 98122 USA
(206) 720-7000
<http://www.homeopathy.org>

The Ontario Federation of Homeopathic Practitioners
PO Box 73617
509 St. Clair Ave. W.
Toronto, ON M6C 1C0
(416) 654-5156

Naturopaths (doctors of naturopathic medicine) study homeopathy as part of their training and many include it in their practices. To find a naturopath in your area, contact

The Canadian Naturopathic Association
4174 Dundas St. W., Suite 303
Etobicoke, ON M8X 1X3
(416) 233-1043

Credits

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Further reading

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Ullman D. *The Consumer's Guide to Homeopathy: The Definitive Resource For Understanding Homeopathic Medicine and Making it Work For You*. JP Tarcher, 1996.

Vithoulkas G. *The science of homeopathy*. Grove Press Inc. New York, NY. 1980.

The homeopathic journals listed below may also be of interest:

British Journal of Homeopathy

Journal of the American Academy of Homeopathy

Simillimum



Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.

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