

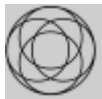


Focus on Alternative and Complementary Therapies
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Focus Altern Complement Ther 2005; **10**: 278–80

Homoeopathy: relic of the past or medicine of the future? (Marking Samuel Hahnemann's 250th anniversary)

Homoeopathy: a relict of the past



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'The most costly of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true.'

Henry Louis Mencken, 1880–1956

Since, after 200 years, there is still no convincing evidence for the effectiveness (never mind the 'principles') of homoeopathy, it seems pretty safe to assume it is a fraud. One can argue that the homoeopathic community has not tried very hard to find such evidence, as illustrated by the recent farce when the Department of Health gave money for projects that mostly failed to address the questions.¹ Perhaps this reluctance to look for evidence isn't surprising. After all, the results could seriously harm the income of homoeopaths. Why then do so many people believe that it works? The answer to that question seems to lie not so much in science as in sociology and fashion.

The first thing to remember is that believing things that are not true is a very common phenomenon. The power of wishful thinking seems to be enormous. Many, perhaps most, people believe what they would like to be true and are remarkably unconcerned about whether it is actually right. It takes only a few minutes with Google to find claims that homoeopathy is a useful treatment for anything from influenza to polio to anthrax. These claims are, of course, irresponsible in the extreme but wouldn't it be nice if they were true?

Victorians had, for the most part, a deep scepticism about homoeopathy. Ernst points out that 'at the end of the 19th century [homoeopathy] had "no scientific recognition" and was "universally condemned"'.² Perhaps the most eloquent Victorian debunking of homoeopathy was the famous essay *Homoeopathy and its kindred delusions* by Oliver Wendell Holmes (the Harvard physician and father of the famous Justice of the Supreme Court with the same name).³ The essay was presented as two lectures to the Boston

Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1842. Very much pithier, and all the nicer for having come from a bishop, were the lines by Bishop William Croswell Doane (1832–1913), first Episcopal bishop of Albany, New York:

Lines on Homoeopathy

Stir the mixture well
Lest it prove inferior,
Then put half a drop
Into Lake Superior.
Every other day
Take a drop in water,
You'll be better soon
Or at least you oughter.

So if a Victorian bishop could see through the fraud, why is it that, in 2005, the newspapers (even the good ones) still have columnists that persist in the delusion that there is something in it?

I propose that the current popularity of homoeopathy, and CAM in general, is merely a sign (and not even the most serious sign) of a reversal of enlightenment values that has been going on for 25 years or so. The enlightenment was the 17th–18th century movement that ended the dark ages. The world as we now know it was created by people like Francis Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Isaac Newton, Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and many others. Rationality was in, superstition was out. Then, in about 1979, it suddenly became quite fashionable to advocate a return to the dark ages (for an excellent account see Wheen).⁴

In 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini denounced cinema and dancing, and returned to Iran to be greeted by an ecstatic crowd who seemed to want nothing more than to turn the clock back 1300 years. Then Margaret Thatcher came to power, followed in 1980 by Ronald Reagan. The fundamentalists of the Christian Taliban in the USA soon came to look more and more like those in Iran, and business ethics took a dive that led to major crimes, such as Enron and Worldcom. It was about this time too when big pharmaceutical companies started behaving badly. This phenomenon has been documented by, among others, Marcia Angell,⁵ Richard Smith⁶ and Richard Horton.⁷ These authors are not whacko conspiratorialists, but, respectively, ex-editors of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *British Medical Journal* and editor of *The Lancet*. They chronicle in excruciating detail the extent to which Big Pharma now corrupts both government and universities.

Arguably, these are all signs of a culture in which truth matters little (but money matters a lot). Ronald Reagan had his astrologer and allegedly the Blairs took their son to a pendulum waver rather than having him immunised (not to mention some really creative delusions when it comes to interpretation

of intelligence reports).⁴ We have a royal family that are devoted to homoeopathy and talking to trees. With leaders like these perhaps it is not surprising that delusional behaviour has flourished for a quarter of a century.

There is an interesting parallel with Darwin. On the whole the Victorians welcomed Darwin's ideas about evolution as a great advance in our understanding of the world. Of course Darwinism was opposed by some religious people, but with the passage of time most religious sects in Europe have come to accept it. Even the last pope accepted it (well, sort of). Woodrow Wilson, asked in 1922 for his thoughts on evolution, replied that 'of course like every other man of intelligence and education I do believe in organic evolution. It surprises me that at this late date such questions should be raised'.

According to a nationwide Harris Poll in June 2005, however, 54% of US citizens said no when asked 'Do you think human beings developed from earlier species or not?' (38% said yes). That's another great leap backwards for mankind.⁸

There is, therefore, nothing unique about CAM when it comes to wishful thinking. It is everywhere you look. Can we expect truth to prevail in the long term? On the whole, I'm optimistic that it will, though not quickly. People are no longer hanged for stealing sheep (or, in Europe, for anything else). And even though our present prime minister favours religious discrimination in schools, that at least is illegal in universities (since 1871). The long-term historical trend for improvement is clear. With luck, the present fashion for not using your brain, in both East and West, will soon come to be seen as a brief hiccough in the course of human progress. Then homoeopathy and its kindred delusions will pass into history.

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Editor's postscript: In the meantime, a *Lancet* editorial entitled 'The end of homoeopathy' (*Lancet* 2005; **366**: 690) concluded: 'Now doctors need to be bold and honest with their patients about homoeopathy's lack of benefit...'