MYTHS ABOUT HOMEOPATHY

People campaigning against homeopathy tend to use the same arguments over and over. When you look at their reasoning it is often very weak, and most often completely unsubstantiated. Let's look at the most frequently used myths about homeopathy.

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It is all mumbo jumbo, and modern science has shown it to be nonsense?
This myth is rarely stated as baldly as this, perhaps because it is so easy to disprove. Virtually every argument against homeopathy which is used today was used within the first 50 years of the discovery of its principles. For example, in a recent UK television programme on Channel 4 Professor Dawkins compared the preparation of a remedy to adding a single drop to the ocean, an argument specifically countered by Hahnemann in 1827 (Samuel Hahnemann, 'How can small doses of such very attenuated medicine as homoeopathy employs still possess great power?' (Reine Arzeneimittellehre vi, 1827, reprinted in Lesser Writings (New Delhi: B. Jain Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2002) p.729).

In fact, the only really new argument (that homeopathy is proved innefective during scientific trials) is fundamentally flawed. In the 1950s the dramatic failure of the methods of testing drugs (such as Thalidomide) led to the proposal that double blind randomised control trials (DBRCTs) should be used. These trials were proposed because the large number of unknown factors affecting such tests made it impossible to assess accurately the effects of a new medicine. Since then these factors have remained unknown, and drugs have still been withdrawn after being adopted on the basis of DBRCT results (such as Vioxx). In other words, there has been no significant development in medical science capable of showing homeopathy to be nonsense, as is claimed by it's opponents.

In the field of biology the modern understanding of the body as a homeostatic system (a reworking of knowledge already in existence in Hahnemann's day) leads necessarily to homeopathic treatment being the correct approach. In the field of physics there is increasing evidence pointing in the direction of an explanation for how homeopathy works.

Homeopathy was better in the old days, because it did nothing while conventional treatments were harmful?
This myth is based on the idea that homeopathy was only successful in comparison with blood-letting and other violent treatments or because it provided a healthier environment for the sick. While these undoubtedly made homeopathy a better alternative, they are unable to explain the success rates of homeopathic hospitals in epidemics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the case of cholera, for example, the death rate in 1831 in Austria was over 50% when citizens used conventional treatment, but fell to between 2.4% and 21.1% under homeopathic treatment (1), the death rate in 1849 in Cincinnati was between 48% and 60% in conventional hospitals and only 3% for those having homeopathic treatment (2), while the average death rate from cholera in 1991 in Peru was 70% (3). In other

words, conventional treatment in the nineteenth century was better than nothing at all, but neither conventional treatment nor doing nothing were anything like as good as homeopathic treatment.

(1) Dana Ullman, Discovering Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21st Century (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1991), pp. 39-40; (2) Dana Ullman, Discovering Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21st Century (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1991), pp. 42-43; (3) http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/pagerender.fcgi?artid=1336296&pageindex=2

Homeopathy is only the placebo effect?
This myth is one which is often adopted by people who know nothing at all about homeopathy. A so-called "pop-myth".

Before addressing this myth, it is necessary to make it clear that the placebo effect is not an imaginary benefit. Often this claim is meant to imply that the patient has not really got better, they just think they have. But this overlooks the fact that people who benefit from the placebo effect really do get better. In fact, for conventional doctors the only difference between getting better from a conventional treatment and a placebo is that they cannot explain why the placebo has made someone better. In a sense, the fact that conventional medicine has a problem with explaining homeopathy means that it is by definition a placebo for them. Of course any new treatment they cannot yet explain is theoretically a placebo too.

The placebo effect is also dependent on the patient expecting a particular result. So with the huge investment in marketing conventional drugs, one should logically expect an enhanced placebo effect from use of those drugs. The idea that an unconventional treatment, which is regularly ridiculed by conventional medical practitioners and experts, has a more powerful placebo effect than would happen with conventional drugs, is a denial of the principles of the effect.

In fact, when it comes to the details, the myth breaks down completely. In the conventional placebo effect the symptoms which the patient believes are being treated get better, but the reaction to a homeopathic remedy is much more complicated. In some cases the patient does claim to feel better, but there is no indication of real change in the symptoms, and for a homeopath this is the true placebo effect. Where changes are observed they reveal a great deal about the case. For example, a homeopath can identify that:

a there is a serious problem of pathological change in the body's tissues
b the patient is only being palliated by the remedy
c the patient is being made worse by the remedy
d the patient has not reacted
e the patient is getting better, but the potency is not the best one
f the patient is getting better but the remedy is not the best one
g the patient is getting better and the choice of remedy and potency are exactly right

This range of reactions cannot be explained by the conventional placebo effect.

The myth also breaks down when you consider how remedies are tested to find out what they can do. Homeopaths test substances for use as remedies by giving healthy people a potentised form of the substance (usually 30c). This is exactly the same form of dose given to patients, and it is given until the provers (the people testing the remedy) start to have symptoms.

The symptoms that follow are recorded in as much detail as possible, including the time and speed of onset, the precise location and nature of the symptoms, and the things which make them better or worse. By gathering this information from a number of different people of different ages and both sexes, it is possible to establish a picture of the way the remedy acts. This is impossible to explain by placebo effect and proves that the remedies can act on the human body in precise ways, even if the mechanism of action is unknown.

Evidence of remedies working on babies and animals also disproves the placebo effect theory, since they do not understand the world about them sufficiently to be able to believe that a remedy is going to do them good. There have been bizarre suggestions that babies and animals are reacting to the expectations of the people treating them, but there is no evidence that the placebo effect can be extended in this way.

The main reason for this myth is the claim that there is nothing in the remedies. Which we deal with next ...

There is nothing in the remedies!

This is a popular myth, and it relies on believing that the science of physics does not exist. The argument used is that when substances are diluted in the process of making potentised remedies, there comes a point when no molecule of the original substance is left. This is calculated by using Avogadro's number (the number of carbon-12 atoms in 12 grams of carbon), and the 12c potency is regarded as the one where no original substance is left in the remedy. However, provings demonstrate that potencies much higher than this cause effects, and so clearly the argument based on chemistry is not sufficient.

When remedies are potentised they are not only diluted, they are also succussed (banged, or shaken vigorously), and banging is known to make iron magnetic, a property which cannot be identified by the methods of chemists but only by those of physicists. Homeopaths have always stated that some property in the remedy is enhanced by the banging, and Hahnemann investigated the different effects consequent on varying the number of succussions and the rate of dilution. As a result he developed three scales of potentisation, one of which usually acts in a very different way from the other two. If there were nothing in the remedies, the action would be the same regardless of the method used, so this tends to confirm the view that it is incorrect to assume that remedies can be explained by chemists.

More recently it has become known that water has some very peculiar properties, and some scientists have been investigating whether these can explain potentisation.

The impurities in the water used to make remedies will affect the nature of the remedy?

This is another myth based on chemistry not physics. If we assume (quite reasonably) that the impurities will have an effect, then the process of preparing a remedy would require us to:

a) Minimise the level of impurities (minimise the "noise" level)
b) Maximise the difference between the levels of the impurities and the required substance (maximise the "signal to noise" ratio)

The method of preparing remedies actually does exactly this. Firstly distilled water is used to minimise impurities. Secondly the amount of the substance added is significantly greater than any of the impurities maximising the difference between the influence of the substance and that of the impurities. If succussion (banging the remedy) in some way establishes the pattern of the remedy on the solution (explained elsewhere), then each dilution will amplify the dominant "signal" of the substance while diffusing the "noise" due to the impurities.

In other words the process of potentisation both confirms the existence of the problem and solves it.

Homeopathy contradicts the known laws of science?

This is another myth which depends on believing that the only scientific laws which matter are those of chemistry. In fact it is modern conventional medicine (based on the idea that everything about us can be explained by chemistry and biology), which attempts to contradict the known laws of science.

Our knowledge of biology has revealed that living organisms (like us) are homeostatic. This means that they make sure that their internal environment is maintained within a range of "normal" limits, controlling the pressure of blood in different parts of the body, the temperature of the body, and the rate of different processes in the body. Any change which takes the body outside these limits is met by balancing changes to bring it back to normal. Obvious examples include sweating in order to cool down, shivering to get warm, increasing the heart rate to supply more oxygen to muscles when running, increasing acid production in the stomach in order to digest food, and so on.

In illness the same process takes place: the fever in 'flu kills the virus infecting the body; white blood cells are delivered to cuts to deal with infection; and vomiting and diarrhoea expel poisoned food. Sometimes it is not possible for the body to return to a normal state, and symptoms persist as a chronic illness. The laws of homeostasis indicate that the correct way to treat such an illness is to stimulate the body's reactions against the symptoms, which is what homeopathy does. Conventional medicine, however, attempts to stop the symptoms directly, and the result is that the body reacts against the drug, producing side effects and sometimes rebound effects. The nature of natural laws is that you ignore them at your peril.