

## Homeopathy is where the heart is

Although light-hearted, Jeffries' essay on homeopathy<sup>1</sup> was out of step with recent moves to recognise the value of complementary and alternative therapies in medical practice,<sup>2</sup> and did nothing to address the paradox of why homeopathic remedies have such widespread use even though they are scientifically implausible.

Despite the methodological challenges inherent in evaluating complementary therapies,<sup>3</sup> over 200 randomised controlled trials of homeopathic treatments have been published, together with several systematic reviews suggesting positive results.<sup>4</sup> The conclusion of a meta-analysis published in the *Lancet* in 1997 was that the clinical effects of homeopathy could not solely be ascribed to placebo.<sup>5</sup>

There is undeniably a problem in explaining the mode of action of ultramolecular solutions. Future developments in our understanding of biophysics may or may not help. Homeopathic practice is, however, based on observational data stretching back over 200 years, and not on some theoretical construct that wilfully disregards conventional science.

Homeopathy is part of the NHS, and used by hundreds of thousands of patients in Britain each year.<sup>4</sup> Rather than repeating the well rehearsed concerns over evidence and mechanism, a more interesting debate would be to try and separate out the specific effects of homeopathy from non-specific effects, such as those relating to the nature of the homeopathic consultation.<sup>6</sup>

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## Homeopathy — a benign deception?

Poor Dougal Jefferies, so sure of the water tightness of his logic that he needs the reassurance of an old medical friend to confirm his infallible argument. We as readers are meant to feel reassured that this 'old medical friend' is prominent, well respected, charismatic and honest. (A bit like Shipman's description before he was found out to be a pathological liar and murderer). Very scientific!

It is so easy to use or misuse science to reject what you can not believe or understand. It is of course difficult, if not impossible to make scientific sense of homeopathy. The same goes for religion where some 'truths' are a matter of faith or experience. Is this good or bad? People with faith live longer and healthier lives than those without. Is it deception or is it honestly trying to understand the miracle that is life and the magic that works in illness and healing? And by the way, if being nice is all it takes to make people better, why do we treat them with so many expensive and potentially dangerous drugs? Nonsense of course. Doctors need tools to work with. For some homeopathy provides valuable tools, for others not. I am sure even Dougal uses non evidence-based tools in his consultation without meaning to deceive. Patience, kindness and interest, sincere or not. Making fun of the way homeopaths look at patients is unwise. I marvel at the observations of homeopaths. They see so much more because symptoms are so important to them. They often end up taking better

histories and doing more thorough examinations. Even if their conclusions do not fit Dr Jeffries scientific concepts, it does not negate the fact they have actually listened and observed, something the modern allopathic GP is less and less inclined to do, being preoccupied with figures, protocols and QoFs. So, maybe not deception, certainly no more than when we create the illusion that treating blood pressure with antihypertensives is actually going to prolong your individual patient's life (with NTT of 50 or more). Treating 49 people with no benefit, nevertheless doing good, doing medicine, just differently. Why not try a different debate for a change? Not whether homeopathy is a fraud or not but for whom and in whose hands it can be healing, making people better. Just what medicine is all about.

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## Screening for haemoglobinopathies in primary care

Your article and editorial about screening for haemoglobinopathies in primary care failed, to my mind, to make it sufficiently clear that we are not talking here about screening for a disease with a view to treatment.<sup>1,2</sup> Rather you are talking here about screening a fetus with a view to possible termination. Clearly, we have among our population people with very different ideas about the ethics of termination. It remains, however, quite different from treatment in its usually understood sense.

The ethical debate cannot be summarised here, but seems to hinge on what we believe the rights of the fetus to be, whether equivalent to those of an adult human being, or in some way less extensive.<sup>3</sup> Many communities