

Advice issued by professional homeopathic associations: a survey of websites

The debate about the value of homeopathy is as old as homeopathy itself.¹ Recently, it has reached new heights when 'the end of homeopathy' was proclaimed by a leading medical journal.² A central issue in this debate obviously is the scientific proof of efficacy of homeopathic medicines.³ Homeopaths tend to either claim that conventional science does not provide the tools for evaluating homeopathy,⁴ or that much of the clinical trial data are demonstrably positive.⁵ Yet independent systematic reviews of rigorous studies regularly fail to confirm this notion.⁶

In this context, it is relevant to evaluate the contents of the websites of professional associations of homeopaths. This was the purpose of the present survey. In particular, my aim was to monitor what therapeutic claims are being published.

METHOD

The websites of all professional homeopathic associations were visited (date 5 August 2008). Those using languages other than English, French, or German were excluded. All sites were searched for statements on the

effectiveness of homeopathy for specific medical conditions. Subsequently, this information was extracted into a table (Table 1).

RESULTS

Thirty associations' websites were located of which eight were excluded because of the language restrictions mentioned above. Of the remaining 22 sites, 12 published statements about the effectiveness of homeopathy for specific medical conditions (Table 1).⁷⁻¹⁷

These data show that about half of all

Table 1. Statements from websites.

Organisation	Statement	Comment
British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons	Dozens of claims; five examples: aconitum treats shock, belladonna for high fevers, colocynthis for colic in horses, hamamelis for bleeding from wounds, hepar sulph for septic infections	Under the heading of 'Homeopathic first-aid medicines'
British Homeopathic Association	'Many conditions can be treated effectively by homeopathy, from asthma, rheumatism, arthritis, eczema to ... cuts and bruises'	Extracted from the FAQ section of the site
British Homeopathic Dental Association	'There are remedies which stop swelling ... reduce pain ... cure ulcers and cold sores and many more'	Extracted from 'Why should you visit a homeopathic dentist?'
Faculty of Homeopathy Malaysia	'Migraine, gastric, stroke, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, fibroid, renal failure, brain tumour, blood clot, hepatitis, gout, arthritis, low sperm count, impotence, stammering, tonsillitis, infertility, and children diseases'	Under the heading 'Diseases that respond well with homeopathy'
Österreichische Gesellschaft für Homöopathie (Austria)	Dozens of claims; five examples: aconite for infections, arsenicum album for burning pain in stomach, belladonna for flu, cantharis for bloody urine, hepar sulfuris for infected skin lesions	Under the heading 'Homeopathic medicine cabinet' (my translation)
Homeopathic Medical Association (UK)	'Cuts, bruises, minor burns, insect bites, hangovers, etcetera. Also extremely effective for allergies, depression, phobias and much, much more'	From 'What can it be used for?'. The site also contains a section entitled 'Immunisation' which implies that homeopathy is preferable to immunisations
Homeopathic Medical Association of Canada	'Homeopathy helps for winter vomiting bug'	Extracted from a press release dated 14 Feb 2008
Irish Society of Homeopaths	Addiction, allergies	Under the heading 'Testimonials'
National Center for Homeopathy (US)	'Find out recommended remedies for this year's flu ...'	Under the heading 'Help in epidemics and crises'
New Zealand Homeopathic Society	Dozens of claims; five examples: memory loss, vaginitis, labour injuries, asthma, croup	Under the heading 'What can homeopathy treat?'
The Society of Homeopaths (UK)	Acute fevers, sore throats, toothache, arthritis, eczema, asthma, anxiety, insomnia	Under the heading 'What can homeopathy treat?'
Verband Klassischer Homöopathen Deutschlands (Germany)	Acute bacterial and viral infections, allergies, migraine, chronic pain, proneness to infections, diseases of the musculoskeletal system, psychosomatic problems	(my translation)

homeopathic associations recommend homeopathic treatments for a wide range of conditions some of which are serious, even life-threatening. There seems to be little agreement between these recommendations.

DISCUSSION

According to this survey, many professional homeopathic associations provide rather concrete recommendations evidently aimed at the lay public. Frequently mentioned indications include asthma, eczema, and infections.

It is relevant to contrast these recommendations with the evidence from controlled clinical trials. A Cochrane review entitled 'Homeopathy for asthma' found six such studies with a total of 556 patients. Its authors concluded that 'there is not enough evidence to reliably assess the possible role of homeopathy in asthma'.¹⁸ No data from controlled clinical trials seem to exist for eczema.¹⁹ In the case of infections, a Cochrane review is available of homeopathic *oscillococcinum* for preventing and treating influenza and influenza-like syndromes. Its authors conclude that, 'although promising, the data were not strong enough to make a general recommendation ...'²⁰ For other types of infections, for example, hepatitis, herpes simplex, herpes zoster, or upper respiratory infections, there are either no or no convincing trial data.²¹ As to the other conditions mentioned in Table 1, compelling evidence from clinical trials is also lacking.²¹

Homeopaths might argue that the clinical trial is not an adequate method for establishing the value of homeopathy.⁴ A full discussion of this question would be beyond the scope of this article; but even if we accepted this notion to be true, one would have to insist that this is made clear to the readers of the websites in question. One could, for instance, include

a disclaimer stating that none of these statements is supported by evidence from controlled clinical trials.

Therefore, it seems to follow that the recommendations by professional homeopathic associations are not based on the evidence from controlled clinical trials. As they are, at least in some cases, related to potentially serious conditions, this advice does not seem responsible. It may therefore be hardly surprising that, in the UK, more and more NHS trusts reject homeopathy.²²

Edzard Ernst

REFERENCES

- Ernst E. The heresy of homeopathy: a brief history of 200 years of criticism. *Br Homeopath J* 1998; **87**: 28–32.
- Anonymous. The end of homeopathy. *Lancet* 2005; **366**(9487): 690.
- Gold PW, Novella S, Roy R, *et al*. Homeopathy — quackery or a key to the future of medicine? *Homeopathy* 2008; **97**: 28–33.
- Milgrom LR. Journeys in the country of the blind: entanglement theory and the effects of blinding on trials of homeopathy and homeopathic provings. *eCAM* 2007; **4**(1): 7–16.
- Mathie RT. The research base for homeopathy: a fresh assessment of the literature. *Homeopathy* 2003; **92**(2): 84–91.
- Ernst E. A systematic review of systematic reviews of homeopathy. *Br J Clin Pharmacol* 2002; **54**: 577–582.
- British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons. Homeopathy works. <http://www.bahvs.com/first-aid.htm> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- British Homeopathic Association Incorporating the Homeopathic Trust. FAQs. www.trusthomeopathy.org/trust/tru_faqs.html (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- British Homeopathic Dental Association. Why should you visit a homeopathic dentist? <http://www.bhda.co.uk/why.php> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- Faculty of Homeopathy Malaysia. Why homeopathy? http://www.persatuanmrhp.freehomepage.com/whats_new.html (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- Osterreichische Gesellschaft für Homöopathie. Homeopathie. [Austrian Society for Homeopathy. Homeopathy]. <http://www.homoeopathie.at/> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- Homeopathic Medical Association — UK. Frequently Asked Questions. <http://www.the-hma.org/faq.asp> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- Irish Society of Homeopaths. Testimonials. http://www.irishhomeopathy.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=43&Itemid=66 (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- National Center for Homeopathy. Help in epidemics and crises. <http://nationalcenterforhomeopathy.org/services/crises/index.jsp> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- New Zealand Homeopathic Society. What can homeopathy treat? <http://www.homeopathy.ac.nz/general/frequently-asked-questions/> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- The Society of Homeopaths. What can homeopathy treat? <http://www.homeopathy-soh.org/about%2Dhomeopathy/> (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- Verband klassischer Homöopathen Deutschlands. [Association of Classical Homeopaths of Germany]. http://www.vkhd.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15&Itemid=41 (accessed 9 Jan 2009).
- McCarney RW, Linde K, Lasserson TJ. Homeopathy for chronic asthma. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2004; **1**: CD000353.
- Kiel T, Witt CM, Roll S, *et al*. Homeopathic versus conventional treatment of children with eczema: a comparative cohort study. *Complement Ther Med* 2008; **16**: 15–21.
- Vickers AJ, Smith C. Homeopathic *oscillococcinum* for preventing and treating influenza and influenza-like syndromes. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2006; **3**: CD001957.
- Ernst E, Pittler MH, Wider B, Boddy K. The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine. 2nd edn. Edinburgh: Mosby/Elsevier, 2006.
- BBC News. NHS trusts 'reject homeopathy'. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7215470.stm> (accessed 13 Jan 2009).

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp09X407036