

EDZARD ERNST

HOMEOPATHY THE UNDILUTED FACTS

INCLUDING A
COMPREHENSIVE
A-Z LEXICON



 Springer

Homeopathy

The Undiluted Facts

Edzard Ernst

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Including a Comprehensive A-Z Lexicon

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Edzard Ernst
Orford
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TO DANIELLE

Foreword

Since you are reading this foreword, I assume you have some interest in homeopathy. Hence, my task is to help you decide whether to read the rest of this book. Before proceeding though, you should know two things about me. First, much of my professional life has involved writing and teaching about “evidence-based medicine” and the better evaluation of treatments, particularly the use of controlled clinical trials. Second, I chaired the recent Australian NHMRC’s review of the evidence on homeopathy referred to in this book. I now dearly wish I had had this book to read—it would have made a wonderful background and road map.

The book you have in your hands is written by the ideal author. Many texts on homeopathy or complementary medicines are polarized and biased—strongly for (by practitioners of homeopathy) or against (by scientists who have little or no experience of homeopathy). But Ernst is both and more. As he describes:

As a youngster growing up in Germany, I was regularly treated by our family doctor who was a nationally famous homeopath. As a junior doctor I worked in a homeopathic hospital, practised homeopathy, and was impressed with its results.

Then later, as a professor of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter, he did many studies of homeopathy (as well as many other areas of medicine). I can’t imagine a better background from which to write with experience and objectivity about homeopathy. An insightful and enjoyable example of his balanced discussions is the section in Chap. 10 on *Spurious Arguments by Proponents of Homeopathy*, followed by *Spurious Argument by Opponents of Homeopathy*. Both proponents and opponents would do well to read these eight pithy pages of wisdom.

It is worth looking at two of those arguments. Proponents argue that “only homeopaths understand homeopathy well enough,” which Ernst points out as a perfect circular argument: We should only listen to expert homeopaths, but of course they do not doubt homeopathy or they would no longer practice. Ernst himself has practiced, which helps to overcome this (circular) objection. However, the opponents often say that “there is no credible evidence at all that supports homeopathy,” but he points out that there are several well-conducted clinical studies of homeopathy which have had positive results. Indeed, the NHMRC

review looked at 57 systematic reviews (on 68 medical conditions) which included 176 individual controlled trials and concluded from these that there “was no discernible convincing effects beyond placebo.” But there were some “positive” studies: As might be expected from 176 trials, a few were “statistically significant” (p-value less 5 %, which is a 1 in 20 chance); however, just by chance 1/20 of 176 would mean about 9 which luck would class as “statistically significant.” Untangling the complexities of such evidence requires solid knowledge of both research and homeopathy. And Ernst has both.

So who should read this book? I would suggest anyone wanting simple, factual, and reliable material on homeopathy and related issues. While it is written primarily for laypeople—and avoids jargon and taking sides—it is delightful and informative read for both laypeople and professionals in health care of all types. Read, enjoy, and be better informed.

May 2016

Paul Glasziou
Director, Centre for Research in Evidence-Based Practice
Bond University, Australia

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Part I
The Facts of the Matter

Chapter 1

Introduction

Homeopathy has been with us for more than 200 years. During this time, it has come in and out of fashion, but finally it seems to have conquered the world. Today, homeopathy is not just popular in Europe, where it originated, it is also used widely in the USA, India, South America, and many other parts of the world. Millions of patients and consumers swear by homeopathy and employ its remedies on a daily basis.

Yet, despite this impressive success, homeopathy has remained one of the most controversial and divisive subjects in all of health care. Some people seem to believe in it with a quasi-religious fervour, while others loath it with a similarly deeply-felt passion. What is worse, the exchanges between the two camps are frequently emotional and less than tolerant. In this climate, it is far from easy for consumers to find simple, factual, and reliable material on this subject.

My book aims to fill this gap by providing clear and concise information about homeopathy and related issues. It is written primarily for laypeople who have an interest in health care and are perhaps tempted to try homeopathy for this or that ailment. I therefore avoid jargon and do my best to abstain from taking sides.

Most publications that have previously been written on this subject—and there are many of them—were, of course, authored by believers in homeopathy. Their stance is often regrettably uncritical or even overtly promotional. Many of these authors fail to disclose their *conflicts of interest* and make highly misleading, *biased* statements and therapeutic claims which potentially endanger the health of anyone who mistakes them for the truth. Consumers are clearly not best served by this type of approach.

A much smaller number of books has been authored by *critics of homeopathy*. They tend to be scathing not only about the therapy itself, but often also about its practitioners and users. Such books are frequently written by people who do not have a full understanding of the subject matter and sceptics who engage in what might be called ‘homeopathy-bashing’. This approach is obviously not in the best interest of the consumer either.

In order to provide responsible and reliable information, it would be helpful, perhaps even necessary, to have the following types of expertise:

- a sound knowledge of *evidence-based medicine*,
- the ability to tell good from poor *science*,
- *experience* as a patient who has been a patient treated by a homeopath,
- research experience in homeopathy,
- published *scientific* papers on the subject,
- application of homeopathy in clinical practice,
- skills of systematic analysis and *critical thinking*.

I can honestly say that I tick all these boxes and should thus be able to present the facts about homeopathy pure and simple.

As a youngster growing up in Germany, I was regularly treated by our family doctor who was a nationally famous *homeopath*. As a junior doctor I worked in a homeopathic hospital, practised homeopathy, and was impressed with its results. Later I researched homeopathy, published around 150 papers on the subject, frequently voicing concern about the quality of the *evidence*. Most importantly perhaps, I have no ‘axe to grind’: I am not—and never have been—in the pocket of the homeopathic industry, nor have I ever been on the payroll of ‘Big Pharma’. All my professional life, I have been an independent academic physician answerable only to my peers, medical *ethics*, and *scientific* as well as professional standards.

With this book, I hope to analyse the known facts fairly and *critically* with a view to enabling my readers to make up their own minds. This book is based on the all-important principle that good medicine must demonstrably generate more good than harm. Where this is not the case, I will say so without attempting to hide the truth.

My foremost aim is to provide a service to consumers by reporting the *scientific* facts in an accessible way. Most people who are tempted to try homeopathy and even many users of homeopathy have little idea what this type of treatment is all about. They might believe that it is akin to *herbal medicine*, for instance. Or they may assume that homeopathy works like *vaccinations*. Or they may think that homeopathy is synonymous with *holistic* health care. Misconceptions of this sort can never be a good basis for therapeutic decisions. I aim not to perpetuate old myths, but rather to facilitate well-informed, *evidence-based* decisions.

In case you are already fully convinced that homeopathy is an *effective* and *safe* treatment for all ailments, if you believe that homeopathy is the victim of a conspiracy by the evil pharmaceutical industry, if you think that I want to stir you towards using dangerous chemical drugs, then this is probably not a good book for you. If, on the other hand, you are persuaded that everything about homeopathy is utter rubbish, that homeopathy has made no contribution to health care at all, that everyone who reports benefit after using homeopathy is a fraud, or that all consumers who are tempted to try homeopathy are stupid, then this book is not what you want either.

My book follows a very simple and clear structure. It has two main parts. Each of the 10 chapters in the first part deals with one particular aspect of homeopathy. They are written in such a way that they should be understandable without consulting any

of the other chapters. Where additional information, explanations, definitions, etc., are deemed helpful, they are provided by the A–Z lexicon which forms the second part of the book. Throughout the book, words in italics can be found in the lexicon. It complements the first part with short paragraphs on specific themes, issues, and topics. The A–Z lexicon also covers subjects that are not mentioned in the first part and are meant to complement it. The lexicon can thus stand alone as a small dictionary in its own right. Together, the two parts of the book should generate a full and rounded picture of homeopathy.

Chapter 2

Definition and Main Principles of Homeopathy

Despite the current popularity of homeopathy, many people fail to understand what it really is. A UK survey, for instance, suggested that 40% of the public thought homeopathy meant ‘natural or *herbal medicine*’. This is not just misleading; it is, as we will see, quite simply incorrect. But how can we define homeopathy? As it turns out, a good *definition of homeopathy* is more difficult to provide than anticipated.

One might simply state that homeopathy is the school of medicine that was first developed by Samuel *Hahnemann* (1755–1843). However, this would tell us very little about the nature of homeopathy. My American Illustrated Medical Dictionary from 1927, a time when homeopathy was still fairly popular in the US, offers a much more practical definition:

Homeopathy is a system of therapeutics founded by Samuel Christian Fredrich Hahnemann based on the following theories: first, the doctrine of signatures, namely, that diseases are curable by those drugs which produce effects on the body similar to the symptoms of the disease (*similia similibus currantur*); second, that the effects of drugs are increased by giving them in minute doses, which are to be obtained by carrying dilution or trituration to an extreme limit; third, the notion that most chronic diseases are only a manifestation of suppressed itch or psora.

A more recent and more authoritative definition was published in the *International Dictionary of Homeopathy*: it states that homeopathy is

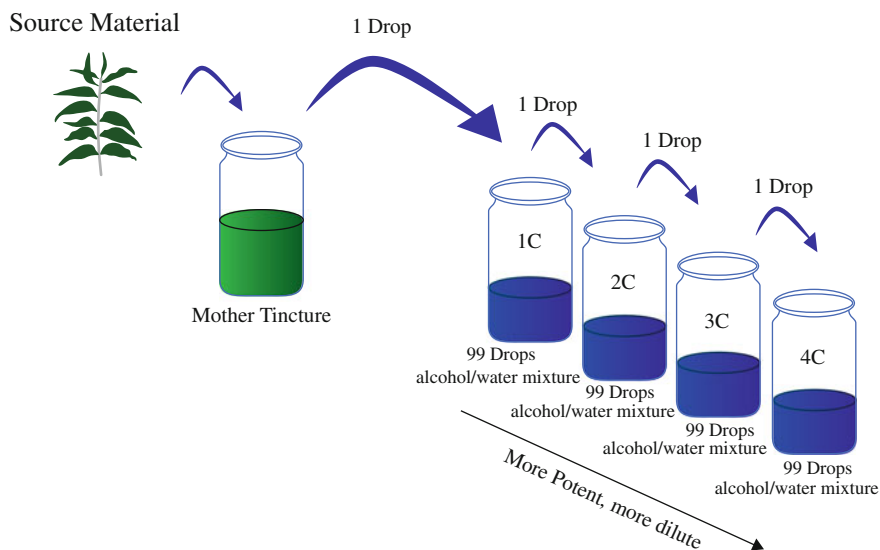
[...] a therapeutic method using substances whose effects, when administered to healthy subjects, correspond to the manifestations of the disorder in the individual patient.

This sentence does describe homeopathy accurately, but it is perhaps too academic to be easily understood. It might be simpler to say that homeopathy is the use of homeopathic remedies for medicinal purposes. This, of course, would beg the question, what is a homeopathic remedy? The answer is easy, albeit not very enlightening; the International Dictionary of Homeopathy informs us that a homeopathic remedy is a

medicinal agent which has been manufactured according to a method stipulated in a homeopathic *pharmacopoeia*. To explain this a bit better, it might be advisable to go gently, step by step.

Many people believe that homeopathic remedies are all based on plants and other natural substances. The truth, however, is that they can be made from almost any material; some are even based on immaterial sources such as *X-rays*. As many are made from plant extracts, and I will use plants as an example to explain briefly how homeopathic remedies are manufactured. More details on the various processes and phenomena involved in the manufacture of homeopathic preparations can be found in the following chapters and in the second part of this book (Fig. 2.1).

Homeopaths call the original plant extract for the production of a remedy a *mother tincture*. This name is fitting: the mother tincture can ‘give birth’ to a countless amount of further remedies. Most, but not all, homeopathic remedies are diluted several times—homeopaths speak of *serial dilution*—in a process called *potentisation* or *dynamisation*. This means that some homeopathic remedies (the ones that are not highly diluted) do contain plenty of material from the mother tincture, while many more are so highly diluted that they contain only a few molecules, and most homeopathic remedies are far too dilute to contain even a single molecule of the mother tincture. A C1 *potency*, for instance, is a 1:100 dilution of the mother tincture, while a C10 potency signifies a dilution of 1 part of mother tincture in 100 000 000 000 000 000 000 000 parts of *diluent*.



Each vial is shaken vigorously after each dilution is made.

Fig. 2.1 Potentisation. This process involves serial dilutions with succussion at each step

If the plant extract in the mother tincture happens to be toxic—many substances used in homeopathy are very poisonous indeed—a C1 potency could easily generate quite serious side-effects. But normally, homeopathic remedies are sold in high potencies (C30 is probably the most popular potency and describes a dilution at the ratio of 1:1 000), which should be entirely free of side-effects, even if its mother tincture is as toxic as *arsenic*, which happens to be a popular homeopathic remedy.

What follows from all this is actually quite simple: most homeopathic remedies are given in high potencies which contain not enough molecules to cause harm. However, this does not mean that low potencies are necessarily harmless as well. In other words, the vast majority of homeopathic remedies cannot cause side-effects, but some undoubtedly have the potential to cause harm.

The practice of homeopathy is based on three unique and entirely independent assumptions—homeopaths like to think of them as *laws*—which were all developed by Samuel Hahnemann, homeopathy's founder.

2.1 Like Cures Like

Homeopathy is first and foremost based on the *like cures like principle* formulated by Hahnemann as ‘*similia similibus currentur*’ (strictly speaking this should not be translated as ‘like cures like’, but by the subjunctive ‘let like be cured by like’). The principle—in fact, it is more an assumption than a principle—holds that, if a substance causes a set of symptoms in a healthy person, it can serve as a remedy for treating these symptoms when they occur in a patient. In the words of Hahnemann:

Every medicine which [...] reproduces most of [the symptoms] present in a given disease, is capable of curing that disease.

Hahnemann called his discovery an ‘eternal, universal *law* of nature.’

A few examples might explain the *law of similars*, as it is often called, better than long theoretical elaborations:

- A typical homeopathic treatment for hay fever would be a preparation of onion. Onions can make our eyes water, which is of course a symptom of hay fever.
- Coffee can keep us awake. A typical homeopathic remedy for insomnia is therefore based on coffee.
- A more exotic, but nevertheless real, example is the homeopathic remedy known as *Berlin wall*. The Berlin wall inhibited communication between people. For homeopaths, this is an indication that a remedy made from fragments of the original Berlin wall can cure a patient's communication problems.

The main problem here is that homeopaths see the like cures like principle as a true law of nature. Few people would deny that, under certain circumstances, a small dose of a substance that caused ill effects can reduce the harm. For instance, some people feel much improved when they drink a glass of beer after an alcoholic excess the