

---

# Is There an Alternative? Homeopathy in Medicine

## In this article:

1. How are homeopathic medicines prepared?
2. How popular is homeopathy?
3. Does it work?

By Mel Borins, MD, CCFP, FCFP

To be presented at the University of Toronto's Primary Care Today sessions (October 4, 2003)

---

**H**omeopathy is a system of medicine first developed in the 19th century in Germany. As it was then, today it is still believed that illness is a result of an imbalance of one's "vital force" or essential energetic makeup. Homeopathy works on the premise that the substance causing symptoms in a healthy person, when diluted could be used to treat those same symptoms in a sick person (Law of Similars). Remedies retain their biological activity if they are diluted and shaken between serial dilutions.

## How are these medicines prepared?

Most homeopathic medications are made from fresh plant, animal, or biological sources. Tinctures are produced

## The case of Jane

Jane, 32, comes to your office complaining of fatigue. She is taking arsenic oxide (arsenicum album), given to her by a homeopathic physician. You are worried about the dangers of ingesting arsenic, but when you go to the Compendium of Pharmaceuticals and Specialties, there is nothing there about homeopathic remedies.

### What should you tell Jane?

and are diluted to varying degrees as necessary and shaken to transfer the energy from the material into the solution. One part of the concentrated solution is diluted with nine or 99 parts of water or alcohol. The dilution is then shaken and one part

*Cont'd on page 96*



# Homeopathy

is further diluted with nine or 99 parts of water or alcohol. This further diluted solution is then given a potency; a one in nine solution is called a 1X and a one in 99 parts is considered a 1C solution.

One part is again diluted with nine or 99 parts of water or alcohol and vigorously shaken, thus becoming a 2X or 2C dilution. At each stage, the solution is further diluted and further shaken. The more diluted it becomes, the more potent it becomes. The dilutions most commonly used are 6C, 30C, 200C, or 1000C. Dilutions beyond Avogadro's Number, where there are no molecules of the original substance left, are said to be most potent. Sometimes the solution is dispensed in little bottles and taken as drops or absorbed into powder or pellets the size of a small ball bearing (made from milk sugar).

## Placing emphasis on the symptoms

Another principle of homeopathy is that remedies matching not only the symptoms of the disease, but also the makeup of the patient are most effective. The remedies are directed to the symptoms of the patient so that one patient having one disease can have entirely different symptoms than another patient with the same disease. Both patients would get entirely different remedies depending not only on the symptoms of the patient and what aggravates those symptoms, but also on the patients themselves (Table 1).

Homeopaths place great emphasis on the patient's symptoms because they regard each symptom as an intelligent manifestation of the disordered defence mechanism. Such symptoms

Table 1

### Comparing cases: Mr. X and Mr. Y both suffer from herpes zoster

#### Mr. X

His rash is swollen, burning, stinging, and red. It is relieved by cold compresses. This reaction is the same as that of a healthy person who has been stung by a bee.

The homeopathic remedy might be apis (honeybee).

#### Mr. Y

His rash is itching, scaling, and oozing. The symptoms are worse at night and are relieved by warm compresses.

Even though the disease is the same as Mr. X, this is a different reaction and would require a different remedy.

need to be supported, rather than interfered with. Thus, the proper matching of therapeutic agents to symptoms is crucial to the success of homeopathy. The ability to individualize such treatment is paramount. In classical homeopathy, the physician might spend anywhere from a half hour to an hour delineating the constellation of symptoms (Table 2).

Some homeopaths are classical and use one remedy per illness, specifically aimed at the totality of the symptoms. Others practise clinical homeopathy and use multiple remedies in combination. Some practitioners use a computer program that lists all the possible symptoms, along with the characteristics of each remedy. The computer helps to match all the variables. Other homeopaths, usually non-medical practitioners, even use pendulums, machines, or intuition to match remedies.

**Dr. Borins** is an assistant professor of family and community medicine, University of Toronto, and a staff member, St. Joseph's Health Centre, Toronto, Ontario. Dr. Borins' Web site is [www.melborins.com](http://www.melborins.com).

Table 2

## What homeopaths are looking for in terms of symptoms

- Location
- Intensity
- Duration
- Time of onset
- What makes symptoms worse/better
- The time of day symptoms are present/absent
- The presence of any mental/emotional symptoms
- Patient's personality

## How popular is homeopathy?

Perhaps the most compelling reason why physicians need to know and understand homeopathy is the rising popularity of the practice. The use of homeopathy in the U.S. has increased more than fivefold since 1990, most of it in the over-the-counter, self-treatment market.<sup>1</sup> Homeopathy is practised in many countries around the world and is most popular in Britain, Germany, India, Pakistan, and France.

Homeopathic products are now available at many health food stores, supermarkets, and pharmacies and anyone can take the remedies without a prescription. Many patients buy a book, read up about the constellation of their symptoms, and then choose a remedy themselves. Other patients may visit a naturopath or other health practitioners who have had some homeopathic training. A properly trained homeopath goes through a rigorous training program very similar to medical school.

However, in most jurisdictions in North America there is no recognition or licensing of doctors of homeopathy and the area is unregulated.

## But, does it work?

A number of trials show homeopathy to be a useful treatment for childhood diarrhea. Jacobs et al. reported a statistically significant decrease in duration of diarrhea in the homeopathic treatment group as compared to the control.<sup>2</sup> Later, she pooled the data of three combined studies and found a consistent effect-size difference of approximately 0.66 day ( $P=0.008$ ).<sup>3</sup>

A study in *The Lancet* compared the effects of a homeopathic preparation of mixed grass pollen with placebo in 144 patients with active hay fever. The homeopathically-treated patients showed a significant reduction in patient and doctor assessed symptom scores. No evidence emerged to support the idea that placebo action fully explained the clinical responses to homeopathic drugs.<sup>4</sup>

The author of this study gave 51 patients with allergic rhinitis a homeopathic remedy matched to their principal allergen. The objective evidence demonstrates that homeopathic dilutions differ from placebo.<sup>5</sup>

Reilly et al. assessed 28 patients with allergic asthma, most of them sensitive to house dust mites. These patients were randomly allocated to receive placebo or homeopathic immunotherapy for their principal allergen. There was a significant improvement in patients' symptoms, respiratory function tests, and bronchial reactivity appearing within one week and persisting for up to eight weeks.<sup>6</sup> However, Lewith et al. repeat-

***"I am not aware of any proof whatsoever that homeopathic medicine can immunize people against anything."***

*Cont'd on page 100*

---

# Homeopathy

## What would I do?

I occasionally ask patients to bring in their references and briefly read over the studies with them. In this way, I learn something from patients and it provides a mutual learning opportunity and shared decision-making.

ed a similar study and there was no change between homeopathy immunotherapy and placebo.<sup>7</sup>

Homeopathy was shown to be useful in post-operative ileus and in the treatment of influenza-like syndromes. It has not been shown to be useful for headaches, migraines, or chronic asthma. Arnica, a popular remedy for trauma, has not been shown to be useful in a review of eight trials.<sup>8</sup>

There are many meta-analyses of randomly-assigned, controlled clinical trials. Generally, the quality of clinical research in homeopathy is poor. Kleijnen et al. assessed the quality of methodology in 107 controlled trials from 96 published reports. The results of the meta-analysis showed a positive trend, regardless of the quality of the trial or the variety of homeopathy used. Overall, of the 105 trials with interpretable results, 81 trials indicated positive results, whereas in 24 trials, no positive effects of homeopathy were found. The conclusion of the authors was that there is a legitimate case for further evaluation of homeopathy.<sup>9</sup>

In 1997, Linde et al. reported on a meta-analysis of 89 placebo-controlled, randomly-assigned, double-blind studies. The authors found that the positive results were not due to placebo. Positive outcomes were found in many different clinical conditions, ranging from allergy, dermatology, and gastroenterology, to neurology and anesthesiology.<sup>10</sup> Linde later reported on 32 trials and found that in 19 placebo-controlled trials, individualized homeopathy was significantly more effective than placebo (pooled rate ratio 1.62, 92% confidence interval 1.17 to 2.23), but when the analysis was restricted to the best trials, no significant effect was seen.<sup>11</sup>

Cucherat et al. identified 118 randomized trials. Sixteen trials fulfilled the inclusion criteria and the combined P value was highly significant ( $P=0.000036$ ).<sup>12</sup> However, studies of high quality were more likely to be negative than lower quality studies. He agrees there is some evidence that homeopathic treatments are more effective than placebo; however, the evidence is low because of low methodologic quality of the trials. In contrast, Ernst believes that there is no evidence that homeopathy is better than placebo.<sup>13</sup>

The problem with doing any scientific evaluation is that, unlike allopathy, there is no one remedy for any particular symptom. Therefore, it is dif-



## Take-home message

- Always ask patients if they are taking alternative therapies.
- Homeopathy is fairly safe and rarely causes serious side-effects. The major harm done is that its use may delay a patient from seeking effective, proven therapy.



# Homeopathy

difficult to perform trials according to symptoms or diseases. Since the emotional and physical makeup of the patient is extremely crucial, one remedy may fit one person's constitution, but can be completely inappropriate for another. It is also very hard to get a control group. Often the studies are evaluating how good one homeopath may be at matching and finding a remedy for a particular problem.

## What should you tell your patients?

It is important to ask patients if they are taking alternative treatments. Most patients don't think of vitamins, herbs, and homeopathy as having any potential for harm so they may not mention their use to their physician. It has been shown that seven out of 10 patients do not tell their physician they are taking alternative treatments, as they fear being judged, criticized, or even rejected completely.<sup>14</sup>

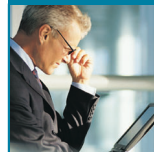
There is general agreement that homeopathy is fairly safe and rarely causes serious side-effects. Sometimes, there can be an aggravation of symptoms that are usually transient. The harm done, if any, is the same as many treatments that have not been scrutinized in double-blind, randomly-assigned, controlled trials. Patients may delay seeking effective therapy for serious diseases, spend money on therapies that are not helpful, and develop false hope in seeking alternatives that don't really work. We can help patients from abandoning conventional therapies with proven value.

One area of worry is immunization. Some people believe they can immunize their children with homeopathic medicines and this will be adequate to protect them against measles, rubella,

polio, and pertussis. I am not aware of any proof whatsoever that homeopathic medicine can immunize people against anything. Educating patients about the scientific data supporting modern and successful immunization programs helps to ensure communities don't abandon the process.

Some physicians don't believe homeopathy is of any value for illness. However, there are many different opinions and enough positive data that if a patient is using homeopathic remedies, physicians should not dismiss it. They should give opinions

[www.stacommunications.com](http://www.stacommunications.com)




For an electronic version of this article, visit:  
*The Canadian Journal of Diagnosis* online.

**Now on  
Alberta  
formulary**

 **CRESTOR**  
rosuvastatin calcium

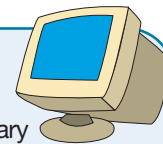
# Homeopathy

and information without judging or attacking the patient. Physicians should try to understand the meaning of the illness for the patient and the belief system of the patient. It may be wise to tell patients that you are unfamiliar with homeopathy, but would be willing to review any information they may have. If patients are using homeopathy in self-limiting conditions like allergies, upper respiratory infections, colic, and hives then the risks are small. It is very different if patients are using it as sole treatment for diseases like cancer, pneumonia, or congestive heart failure, where modern medical care is usually necessary.

Physicians cannot be expected to have expertise in homeopathy. However, it is important to be familiar with the expanding field of complementary medicine, so as to help patients make informed decisions. If well-informed, physicians can protect their patients from misinformation, harmful treatments, and quackery. 

For a quick-take on this article, go to our Frequently Asked Questions on page 31.

## Surf your way to...



1. The Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine Web site for Health-Care Professionals:  
[www.camline.org](http://www.camline.org)
2. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine:  
<http://nccam.nih.gov>

### References

1. Eisenberg DM, Davis RB, Ettner SL, et al: Trends in alternative medicine use in the United States 1990-1997: Results of a followup national survey. *JAMA* 1998; 280(18):1569-75.
2. Jacobs J, Jimenez LM, Gloy SS, et al: Treatment of acute childhood diarrhea with homeopathic medicine: A randomized clinical trial in Nicaragua. *Pediatrics* 1994; 93(5):719-25.
3. Jacobs J, Jonas MD, Jimenez-Perez M: Homeopathy for childhood diarrhea: Combined results and meta-analysis from three randomized, controlled clinical trials. *Pediatr Infect Dis J* 2003; 22(3):229-34.
4. Reilly DT, Taylor MA, McSharry C, et al: Is homeopathy a placebo response? Controlled trial of homeopathic potency, with pollen in hay fever as model. *Lancet* 1986; 18(8512):881-6.
5. Taylor MA, Reilly D, Llewellyn-Jones RH, et al: Randomized controlled trial of homeopathy versus placebo in perennial allergic rhinitis with overview of four trial series. *BMJ* 2000; 321(7259):471-5.
6. Reilly D, Taylor MA, Beattie NG, et al: Is evidence for homeopathy reproducible? *Lancet* 1994; 344(8937):1601-6.
7. Lewith GT, Watkins AD, Hyland ME: Use of ultramolecular potencies of allergen to treat asthmatic people allergic to house dust mite: Double-blind randomized controlled clinical trial. *BMJ* 2002; 324(7336):1-5.
8. Ernst E: Efficacy of homeopathic arnica. *Arch Surg* 1998; 133(11):1187-90.
9. Kleijnen J, Knipschild P, Riet G: Clinical trials of homeopathy. *BMJ* 1991; 302(6772):316-23.
10. Linde K, Clausius N, Ramirez G, et al: Are the clinical effects of homeopathy placebo effects? A meta-analysis of placebo-controlled trials. *Lancet* 1997; 350(9081):834-43.
11. Linde K, Melchart D: Randomized controlled trials of individualized homeopathy: A state of the art review. *J Altern Complement Med* 1998; 4(4):371-88.
12. Cucherat M, Haugh MC, Gooch M, et al: Evidence of clinical homeopathy: A meta-analysis of clinical trials. *Eur J Clin Pharmacol* 2000; 56(1):27-33.
13. Ernst E: A systematic review of systematic reviews of homeopathy. *Br J Clin Pharmacol* 2002; 54(6):577-82.
14. Eisenberg DM, Kessler RC, Foster C, et al: Unconventional medicine in the USA. *N Eng J Med* 1993; 328(4):246-52.

*Dr. Borins would like to thank Barbara Iwasiuk, librarian at St. Joseph's Health Centre, for her assistance.*