

Study: Homeopathy No Better than Placebo



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Homeopathic treatment is no more effective than a placebo, the dummy substance used in medical trials, according to a study appearing in the British medical weekly, "The Lancet."

The renowned medical journal said in a hard-hitting editorial called "The End of Homeopathy" that the time for more studies is over and doctors should be honest with patients about homeopathy's "lack of benefit."

The author of the article, Dr. Matthias Egger from the University of Berne, said he and associates in Britain and Switzerland searched 19 electronic databases covering the period from 1995 to 2003.

They compared 110 trials of homeopathic remedies against a placebo with 110 trials of conventional medicines, which were also tested against a placebo.

The ailments being treated in these trials included respiratory-tract infections, pollen allergies and asthma, gynecological and obstetric problems, muscle and joint ache and intestinal upsets.

The researchers found that, in small trials which they deemed to be of poor quality, both homeopathic and conventional medicines appeared to fare better against placebos. But in larger trials that were of high quality, they found no convincing evidence that homeopathy worked better than placebos.

Like with like

Homeopathy is based on the principle of treating like with like, also called the law of similary.

The homeopathic practitioner generally looks at the totality of symptoms of a given case, then chooses a remedy that has been reported to produce a similar set of symptoms in healthy subjects. This remedy is usually given in extremely low concentrations.

For example, a person with an allergy would be given an ultra-diluted dose of an agent that would cause the same symptoms.

Saxon founder

The theory of homeopathy was developed by Samuel Hahnemann, a physician from Saxony, who first published it in 1796.

Homeopathy went into decline in the 20th century with the rise of antibiotics and other modern medicines, but in the past decade has staged a comeback, igniting controversy at the same time.

Over the past two decades, there has been a boom in both the use of homeopathic remedies and visits to homeopathic practitioners. Analysts say there are several reasons for this. Homeopathic treatment is reported by many to be effective.

Others are disaffected with the traditional medical establishment, which they consider cold and uncaring. Homeopathic practitioners often spend much more time dealing

with their patients than do conventional practitioners. Homeopathic preparations also have few if any side effects and are generally much cheaper than conventional medications.

Critics, however, consider homeopathy to be unscientific and lacking any plausible mechanism. They often view homeopathy as a pseudoscientific remnant from the age of alchemy, when the behavior of chemical and biological phenomena were poorly understood.

In 2002, the American illusionist and skeptic James Randi offered \$1 million to anyone able to prove, under observed conditions in a laboratory, that homeopathic remedies can really cure people. Thus far, no one has passed the preliminary tests.

Popular in Germany

Even so, homeopathy has a fervent vocal lobby of supporters, and health insurance schemes in Europe are under increasing pressure to include it in their coverage.

In Germany, where homeopathy is very popular, there are about 6,000 physicians specializing in the field. In 1978, it was recognized as "special form of therapy," meaning the medication was freed from the usual requirements of proven efficacy.

But since the beginning of 2004, homeopathic medications, with a few exceptions, are no longer covered by public health insurance. Many private health insurers continue to cover homeopathy.