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Introduction

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WHY LEARN ABOUT HOMEOPATHY?

There are several reasons why a physician or any other medical professional ought to learn about homeopathic medicine. In addition to the health benefit if homeopathy works, study of homeopathy can impart knowledge and unique homeopathic perspectives that will benefit even a skeptical student and his or her patients.

The most important reason to study any medical therapy is for the benefit the therapy can offer to patients. Although homeopathy has not been studied as extensively as almost anyone would like, homeopaths have accumulated two centuries worth of documented clinical evidence of homeopathy's efficacy in a very broad range of illnesses. Recent research tends to support this experiential evidence. Homeopathy first

became famous as a means of successfully treating the horrible epidemics of the nineteenth century. Because we are now threatened by the rise of new microbial diseases and the waning effectiveness of antibiotics, other options are urgently needed. Homeopathy can often provide an effective alternative to antibiotics. Homeopathy's most unique capability is to alleviate chronic illness; because treatment of chronic illness is conventional medicine's greatest weakness, homeopathy may be the ideal form of complementary medicine.

Another reason to study homeopathy is its popularity. Regardless of a physician's own interest in homeopathy, some of his or her patients are very likely to be using it. At a minimum, physicians must learn about the uses and misuses of homeopathic medicine for their patients' safety.

Eisenberg and others conducted a landmark study of "unconventional medicine" that determined that

roughly 600,000 American adults saw homeopathic practitioners in 1990, and another 1.2 million used homeopathy for self-care.¹ Over the past decade, figures show that sales of homeopathic medicine have been rising at an annual rate of approximately 20%.²

A 1997 survey by Landmark Healthcare found that 5% of the American adult population, approximately 9 million people, reported use of homeopathic products in the prior year; 73% of that use was for self-treatment.³

David Eisenberg and colleagues followed up on their 1990 data with another national survey in 1997. They found that the use of homeopathy increased fivefold to 6.7 million adults—3.4% of the adult population. They also found that self-care use increased to more than 82%, meaning that 5.5 million American adults were using homeopathy independent of any professional supervision.⁴

A linear projection of these data suggests that the number of adult Americans using homeopathy by 2002 has risen to 12 to 13 million, with 8 to 10 million using it on their own. Although many of the most popular homeopathic products sold in the United States are specifically intended for use by children, we have no national data regarding the extent of pediatric use.

Self-treatment predominates the homeopathic landscape and its repercussions must highlight any consideration of homeopathy by American health care providers. In their first survey, Eisenberg and colleagues found that more than 60% of those using unconventional therapies did not tell their conventional physicians. This was disturbing proof of patients' mistrust of their conventional physicians' attitudes. Unfortunately, the second survey did not find any improvement in the following years. Patients have simply been unwilling to speak to their conventional physicians about their use of alternative therapies. Assuming this figure is applicable to homeopathy, approximately 6 to 8 million Americans use homeopathic medicines every year without the knowledge of their conventional physician or the supervision of a professional homeopath. Their conventional physicians therefore do not know whether the effects, beneficial or adverse, their patients are experiencing are from the covert use of homeopathy or from conventional treatment.

Assuming this pattern of nondisclosure holds true for homeopathic patients (we have no data to support or confirm this supposition), that minority

who do inform their physicians are likely to be more knowledgeable about the subject than their physicians. Only rarely do patients tell me they discussed their use of homeopathy with their "other" doctors. When a patient reports that a conventional physician has even the most meager knowledge of homeopathy, it is a rare event. This ignorance can be harmful to the patient and embarrassing to the physician.

Homeopathic medicine's philosophy of healing and understanding of illness adds tremendously to the practice of medicine. Hering's Laws of Cure, for example, helps the physician determine whether a patient's response to any therapy is curative or suppressive (Box 1-1). This method of analysis is applicable whether the treatment is homeopathy, acupuncture, conventional medication, or surgery. The family practice residents and medical students in my classes have been excited about the philosophic understanding of health they have gained from studying homeopathy. They have a hunger to make sense of their growing experience of clinical medicine. Homeopathic philosophy can help them achieve an understanding beyond what they learn in their conventional training.

One of the most striking differences between conventional medicine and homeopathic clinical practice is the patient interview. The homeopath needs a tremendous amount of precisely detailed information to select, from the large number of potential

BOX 1-1

*Hering's Laws of Cure*⁵

Dr. Constantine Hering, the father of American homeopathy, taught that the healing process progresses as follows:

- 1. Symptoms are resolved in reverse order; that is, healing progresses from the most recent condition to the oldest**
- 2. The recession of the symptoms progresses from the upper body parts downward to the lower body parts**
- 3. The symptoms that are resolved first are those that affect the deeper organs and tissues, whereas those that are resolved later are more superficial**
- 4. Improvement occurs with the more important organs and systems first, then moves on to the less important ones**

homeopathic medicines, the appropriate medicine for each patient. The patient interview and physical examination is the sole means of acquiring this information. Laboratory testing and other modern diagnostic methods have yet to be correlated with homeopathic prescribing. The homeopath must develop interviewing skills to a very high degree to obtain the necessary information. On several occasions, nonhomeopathic medical school faculty members have suggested to me that medical students should receive their training in proper interviewing skills from homeopaths because of the care with which homeopaths interview patients.

HOMEOPATHY AND CONTROVERSY

Homeopathy is a soup made from the shadow of a pigeon that starved to death.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, William Seward, the Secretary of State, was also wounded by Booth's gunfire. Like many of America's mid-nineteenth century elite, Seward's physician, Dr. Tullio Verdi, was a homeopath. The Surgeon General, Joseph K. Barnes, was first on the scene, and he cared for both men until Dr. Verdi arrived. Barnes then reported to Verdi the care he had provided to Seward.

The Surgeon General's actions provoked controversy within the fledgling American Medical Association (AMA). The controversy involved what officially constituted unethical behavior on the part of Lincoln's physician, and led to his censure by the Washington Medical Society. The Surgeon General had violated the AMA's "Consultation Clause," which banned its members from consulting with homeopaths or even providing treatment to a patient who had seen a homeopath until that patient formally discharged the homeopath.

Fortunately this degree of hostility has been relegated to the history books. Research evidence that this unorthodox therapy might actually be effective has helped open serious consideration of homeopathy. However, homeopathy has often been controversial. Although its history does not lack for colorful and dramatic personalities, the controversial aspect of homeopathy is primarily a result of its fundamen-

tal philosophic opposition to the world-view of conventional medicine.

The name for conventional medicine's therapeutic philosophy is *allopathy*, meaning *against suffering*, whereas homeopathy's philosophy is based on the concept of *similar to suffering*. Although homeopathy is almost purely *homeopathic*, allopathic medicine is far from truly *allopathic*. Allopathic medicine includes a philosophic hodgepodge of methods, including some that could even be called homeopathic. Uncomfortably, it was Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy, who named allopathic medicine. In many ways homeopathic medicine has helped allopathic medicine define itself over the past two centuries by providing a clear-cut and consistent model of what allopathic medicine is not.

Homeopathy's "similar to suffering" theory refers to the therapeutic use of substances that, when ingested, create symptoms identical to those the patient is experiencing. This defining principle is diametrically opposed to the therapeutic approach of orthodox medicine, whose aim is to prescribe pharmacologic substances that will oppose the patient's symptoms. Homeopathy and conventional medicine also have opposing interpretations of the nature of those symptoms. The homeopath believes the symptoms result from the organism's effort to heal itself, whereas the allopath tends to view the symptoms as equal to the problem. If you look at the index of the *Physicians' Desk Reference*, you will find that it is largely made up of "anti" medication; antacids, antiarthritics, antibiotics, anticoagulants, anticonvulsants, antidepressants, antiemetics, antihistamines, and antiinflammatories, for example. Whereas the homeopath gives a remedy to act in concert with the patient's symptoms, the allopath prescribes to obstruct those symptoms.

This fundamental principle of homeopathy makes more sense as our scientific understanding of human physiology advances. When my medical school microbiology professor lectured to our class about evidence that the symptoms we experience in acute infectious diseases are the result of the immune system's mobilization to combat the disease and are not the direct effect of the microorganism, I recognized the "homeopathy" in the physiology. It makes sense, then, that a substance that accentuates the symptoms already produced by the body could assist the healing process by augmenting the already operating source of those symptoms—the immune response.