

## **Information about homeopathy September 2009**

*(Information about homeopathy September 2009 – European Central Council of Homeopaths (ECCH))*

The following answers some of the questions commonly raised about homeopathy:

- **Homeopathy – what is it?**
- **Homeopathy and conventional medicine**
- **What does the European public think about homeopathy?**
- **In what types of complaint has homeopathy been found to be effective?**
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The following answers some of the questions commonly raised about homeopathy.

### Homeopathy – what is it?

**Homeopathy is a discrete healthcare system which can be used independently or alongside conventional medicine.**

Homeopathy is an effective and scientific healthcare system suitable for most patients. It **assists the natural tendency of the body to heal itself**. It is a **holistic** approach to healthcare taking into account each patient's symptom picture within the context of their life situation. Homeopaths prescribe homeopathic medicines appropriate for each patient and their presenting condition.

Homeopathy is practised worldwide and is the **most frequently used CAM therapy** in 5 out of 14 countries in Europe, and one of three CAM therapies most frequently used in 11 out of 14 countries (1, 2).

**Homeopathy is a safe treatment** (3). Homeopathic medicines are highly diluted and do not cause toxic side effects. To ensure safe treatment patients should consult with qualified and registered homeopaths who have sufficient training to enable them to be responsible for their patients' treatment. An overview of associations representing such practitioners in Europe may be found at [www.homeopathy-ecch.eu](http://www.homeopathy-ecch.eu) and for practitioners worldwide at [www.homeopathy-ich.org](http://www.homeopathy-ich.org)

### Homeopathy and conventional medicine

**Homeopathy may be used as an alternative** for patients where effective and safe conventional treatment does not exist. One example is chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), where homeopathic treatment can be of considerable benefit. Homeopaths' clinical experience has also been confirmed through research on homeopathy in CFS (4).

In other situations **homeopathy may be used to complement conventional treatment**. A good example is in treatment of children suffering from diarrhoea. In these cases oral rehydration is the most important intervention but research has confirmed homeopaths' experience, that homeopathy may be used as an effective supplement in reducing the duration and severity of diarrhoea (5-7).

In some cases homeopathy can alleviate unwanted side-effects of conventional drug treatments. An example is the use of homeopathy to treat side-effects of cytotoxic drugs and radiation used in the treatment of cancer (8-9).

**Homeopaths and medical doctors should work more closely together** in order to better help more patients. No practitioner or therapy can claim to be able to help all patients, but communicating and working together homeopaths, medical doctors and other healthcare practitioners can help more patients more effectively. All healthcare practitioners can also learn from each other through closer cooperation and integrated healthcare.

## **What does the European public think about homeopathy?**

The fact that **29 % of Europeans use homeopathy** for their health care shows that homeopathy is in demand (10). Several surveys confirm that homeopathy is a popular healthcare option that is considered effective in Europe. A poll carried out in Norway in 2001 showed that 52 % of the population were of the opinion that **homeopathy should be a part of the public health service** there (11). Furthermore, **half of all Norwegian nurses** think homeopathy should have a place within the public health service (12) and **half of all medical doctors** are willing to recommend patients to a homeopath (13). A research overview considering the effect of homeopathy found positive results in **diarrhoea in children, upper respiratory tract infections, hay fever, influenza, fibrositis, pain, injuries and side effects of cytostatica and radiation therapy** (14).

## **In what types of complaint has homeopathy been found to be effective?**

**Homeopathy can be used to treat patients suffering from a wide range of complaints**, not very different from those seen in general medical practice (15). In an observational study of over 6 500 patients treated over a six year period in a University Hospital Outpatient clinic in the UK, with over 23 000 consultations, over **70 % of patients reported positive health changes**, and more than 80 % of 1 270 children experienced and improvement (16). In another study of almost 4 000 patients treated by 103 primary care practitioners (medical doctors), 97 % suffered from chronic complaints lasting an average of 8.8 years (17). Most frequent complaints were allergy, headache and eczema. **Significant improvement in most complaints was recorded**, as well as **improvement in patients' quality of life**.

## **The most common arguments against homeopathy**

Critics of homeopathy say there is no **evidence base** to claim that homeopathy has an effect, or at least not an effect beyond placebo (an effect resulting from a belief that the patient will improve). This is simply untrue. **There is increasing evidence that shows that homeopathy does have an effect over and above placebo.**

**Appropriate research methodologies are needed to test the effect of homeopathic treatment.** Methodologies used to test conventional drugs are of limited use in testing the effect of homeopathic treatment. The main reason for this is the fact that homeopathic medicines are prescribed on an individual basis for each patient. For example: 10 patients suffering from e.g. migraine headaches may often each be prescribed a different homeopathic medicine. It is not possible to test the effect of one single homeopathic remedy in the treatment of a group of patients with the same medical diagnosis, as is often done in research in conventional medicine. Randomised placebo-controlled trials therefore only have limited value in evaluating the effect of homeopathic treatment.

Furthermore, because of the **holistic approach** of homeopathy the particular symptoms of a diagnosed condition may not appear to respond quickly to treatment even though the overall health of a patient will begin to improve as a precursor to the diagnosed disease symptoms beginning to disappear. For example, in a trial of homeopathy for the treatment of eczema, a patient's eczema may not improve during the trial period. Several factors need to be taken into account: the trial period may be too short, and there may be other changes, e.g. the patient may report feeling generally better, having more

energy, and is sleeping better. It is the observation of homeopaths that these changes often precede improvement in the eczema, particularly in a case where it has been previously treated conventionally with steroid creams for example.

In the research of any therapy it is usually the case that some trials will produce positive results and others negative or inconclusive results. Having said this, a number of **meta-analyses and literature reviews** have looked at the existing research evidence for homeopathy. Such an analysis or review looks at the overall existing research documentation, and aims at determining whether the overall results show an effect for homeopathy or not. Out of nine such analyses and reviews published over the past 20 years, the first **eight found results in favour of homeopathy** (18-24). The first of these studies found an overall positive effect in 77 % of the trials (22). In an overview of 89 trials, with a clear effect in favour of homeopathy over placebo, researchers calculated that if new trials with no effect were to be added so that the overall result would show no difference between homeopathy and placebo, then this would have to include 923 studies with 118 patients in each (20). This clearly indicates how **strong the evidence is in favour of homeopathy**.

As already stated, eight of nine meta-analyses and literature reviews found in favour of homeopathy. In the ninth study researchers concluded that they did not find an effect in favour of homeopathy (25). Several scientists and researchers around the world have since condemned this particular study for its poor methodology. The authors first claimed that their conclusions were based on 110 homeopathy trials compared to 110 trials of conventional medicine. However, they had based their conclusions on 8 homeopathy trials compared with 6 conventional trials only. When re-analysing the data of this study, researchers found that **homeopathy had a significant effect beyond placebo**, and the conclusions drawn by the original authors were highly influenced by one single trial (26). Moreover, the researchers found that **the overall quality of homeopathy trials was significantly higher than in the conventional trials** (27).

Another argument used against homeopathy is that any effect of homeopathic medicines cannot be explained within the **basic conventional science disciplines of chemistry and pharmacology**. This is true and homeopaths recognise this. At this stage, scientists have still not agreed on one single model of explanation that helps us understand how potentised homeopathic medicines work. Homeopathic remedies are diluted, often to such an extent that there is in principle not a single molecule left of the original substance. They are however not just diluted, but also **succussed** (vigorously agitated) in the process of production. Some scientists have proposed that by so succussing the medicine, **information from the original substance somehow transfers to the solution it is being dissolved in**. Usually purified water is used throughout this process, and the information would appear to be transferred and retained by modifying the dynamic network of weak bonds between individual solvent molecules.

Water is a unique substance that plays a major role in the existence of human beings and most of life on earth. Studies of the properties of water have shown that it has at least 64 so-called 'anomalies' in its scientific properties (28). It can take the form of anywhere between 2 to 280 dynamic molecule clusters, and it is highly influenced by its surroundings. Scientists have found that structural information can be transferred from one material to another without the need for any chemical reactions to take place, and water is a substance that does so with the greatest ease (29, 31). Evidence from materials science and physical chemistry suggests that the method used to produce

**homeopathic remedies changes the molecular structure of the solvent** (30-36). Subtle but significant differences have been found between ultra-diluted solutions prepared in the homeopathic manner with succussion, and those that have simply been diluted (30, 37).

Furthermore, it must be added that **well-documented laboratory research has also found an effect of substances in high dilutions**. In a meta-analysis of 105 articles on laboratory research, the authors found a positive effect 50 % more often in the trials that were of highest methodological quality (23). Since then, more researchers have found positive effects of substances in high dilutions in multi-centre studies of high quality (38-41).

### **What is the future of homeopathy?**

It is understandable that there are some individuals who, being firmly based within scientific disciplines that adhere strongly to a materialistic view of the world, question the effect of homeopathy. However, research does seem to consistently indicate that **homeopathy has a clinical effect**, even though agreement has yet to be reached on precisely how homeopathic medicines work. Moreover, large numbers of **citizens all across Europe and in the world use homeopathy**, and **outcome studies show clear improvement after treatment**.

It would seem wise therefore for **national governments to invest in further research in homeopathy** and to **consider including homeopathy in healthcare systems**. Its low cost and high safety profile are clear added bonuses to its increasingly apparent effectiveness across a wide range of conditions that patients commonly present with in primary care settings. The homeopathy profession has taken responsibility to ensure the **quality of education and treatment provision**, through setting **established guidelines** that are published by both national and international organisations ([www.homeopathy-ecch.eu](http://www.homeopathy-ecch.eu)).

**The time has come for homeopaths, medical doctors and other healthcare practitioners to work together, through integrated healthcare projects and in research, for the benefit of all patients.**

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