

Homeopathic remedies safe – but not risk free



JOE SCHWARCZ THE RIGHT CHEMISTRY

Critics of homeopathy have been known to swallow entire bottles of homeopathic pills to make the point they contain nothing but sugar. But homeopaths are not disturbed by this demonstration because, according to the tenets of homeopathy, increasing the dosage actually reduces the effect. So, the critics would face danger not by taking more pills, but by just licking one. Or, perhaps, they could overdose by staying away from the pills altogether.

We can safely say that homeopathic remedies pose no risk of side effects or of toxicity. Just try calling a poison control centre to say that you accidentally took too many homeopathic pills. You'll get a response along the lines of "forget it," or "bogus product." But does this mean that homeopathy presents no risks? Not at all. There are several concerns.

Some homeopathic remedies may not actually be homeopathic. More seriously, some homeopaths offer pills for protection against malaria or radiation exposure. Others claim that they can treat cancer, with the most outrageous ones urging their victims to give up conventional treatment. Finally, there is the matter of Health Canada issuing a DIN-HM (Drug Identification Number-Homeopathic) to homeopathic products, implying to the consumer that these remedies have been shown to be safe and effective. Safe, yes. Effective, no.

Let's amplify. Marketers sometimes use the term "homeopathic" to describe products that are not diluted to an extreme. A classic case is Zicam, sold as an intranasal

homeopathic cold remedy until 2009 when the Food and Drug Administration advised that the product be avoided because of a risk of damage to the sense of smell. Zicam actually contained a significant amount of zinc gluconate so it was not homeopathic in the traditional sense. This, though, is not nearly as serious as recommending ridiculous malaria protection pills that contain no active ingredient to people travelling to areas where the disease is endemic.

And how about Homeopaths Without Borders? I kid you not. Here is one of their gems: "With the onset of the rainy season in Haiti there will be a great need for remedies to treat dengue, malaria, cholera and other tropical diseases." Claiming that homeopathy can treat these diseases is criminal. Jeremy Sherr of Homeopathy for Health in Africa, goes even farther: "I know, as all homeopaths do, that you can just about cure AIDS in many cases." Nonsense, of course, and even disparaging to most homeopaths who draw the line at claiming cures for serious diseases.

Perhaps the most reprehensible practitioners of homeopathy are

those who prey upon desperate cancer victims. The following comes from the Wisconsin Institute of Nutrition, whatever that may be: "The important thing to know about cancer and choosing whether to use homeopathy or not is that surgery will not remove the disease. Most people will still opt for conventional treatment, so how can homeopathy be useful to them? They can take the appropriate remedy after surgery to prevent recurrence. For strict homeopathic thinking, such a procedure is not optimum." Needless to say, there is zero evidence that sugar pills can prevent a recurrence of cancer.

Homeopaths are not ones to miss a marketing opportunity. Soon after the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in Japan, several offered remedies for either the treatment or prevention of radiation poisoning. Believe it or not, one of the suggested remedies was "X-ray." What is it? A sugar pill treated with a homeopathic dose of X-rays. I wonder how one dilutes X-rays. What bunk.

Homeopathy has always been challenged by scientists, but now consumers are beginning to realize the delusion of dilution. In California, homeopathic manufacturer Boiron settled a \$12-million class-action lawsuit that alleged the company had violated false-advertising laws by claiming that homeopathic remedies have active ingredients. Boiron will now be adding a disclaimer to say that its claims have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration, as well as an explanation of how the active ingredients have been diluted. In Australia, a woman is suing a homeopath she claims offered misleading information to convince her sister to give up conventional cancer treatment.

In Britain, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee released a report stating that homeopathic remedies work no better than placebos and should no longer be paid for by the National Health Service. The committee also criticized homeopathic companies for failing to inform the public that

their products are "sugar pills containing no active ingredients."

And at a British Medical Association conference, an overwhelming vote supported a ban on any funding of homeopathic remedies, calling them witchcraft.

In Canada, our Natural Health Products Directorate has a mandate "to ensure that Canadians have ready access to natural health products that are safe, effective and of high quality." Yet, it licenses homeopathic products without requiring proof of efficacy. Why should the manufacturers of these products be less accountable than those of other pharmaceuticals?

Knowing this, how can pharmacists in good conscience sell sugar pills that claim to have ghostly images of molecules?

Homeopathic remedies work through the placebo effect. That of course is not negligible. Placebos can have success rates of over 30 per cent! But if you think there's something more to homeopathy, consider the following: How come different homeopaths prescribe different remedies to the same person for the same condition? How come drugs, other than homeopathic remedies, do not increase in potency when they are diluted? How come the trace impurities in the sugar used to make the tablets, or in the water or alcohol used for dilution, which are present at higher concentration than the supposed active ingredient, have no effect? How can remedies that are chemically indistinguishable from each other have different effects? And how come a producer of homeopathic remedies given an unidentified pill cannot determine the original substance used to make the dilution?

Finally, how come there are no homeopathic pills for diabetes, hypertension or birth control?

Now I think I've said enough. According to homeopathic principles, if I say more and more about the irrationality of homeopathic remedies, the effectiveness of my arguments will become less and less.

Joe Schwarcz is director of McGill University's Office for Science and Society (OSS.McGill.ca).

He can be heard every Sunday from 3-4 p.m. on CJAD radio.

joe.schwarcz@mcgill.ca



PETER MACDIARMID GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO

Why should the manufacturers of homeopathic products be less accountable than those of other pharmaceuticals?