

Lots of people rely on homeopathy. Can they all be wrong? Yes

AUG 31 2013

“It’s natural medicine.” “Herbal remedies.” “It’s like ... acupuncture.” “No chemicals.” “Energy healing.” “Yogurt.” Such were the common responses when we asked random people, including physicians, about their thoughts on homeopathy. All wrong. Homeopathy is none of these.

Several opined something along the lines of “alternative medicine,” and a few knew that it had something to do with the supposed healing ability of extremely dilute solutions. And one gave a quick, succinct answer: “Homeopathy is an affront to science.” Bang on!

Homeopathy has nothing to do with herbal remedies, many of which have legitimate uses. It is a practice hatched in the dark ages of science based on the idea that substances that cause symptoms in a healthy person can cure those same symptoms in an ill person. (So, for instance, onions, which make eyes itchy and tearful, can be used to relieve the symptoms of hay fever.) There is no logic to this, but this is not where it stops. Homeopaths, defying everything we know about toxicology, believe that diluting a solution containing a homeopathic remedy increases its potency. In fact, to potentiate the remedy, dilutions are carried out to an extent that the final product in most cases doesn’t even contain a single molecule of the original “remedy.”

Modern-day homeopaths have to admit this, and use the argument that the sequential dilutions and the tapping of the solution against a leather pillow after each dilution leaves an imprint of the original substance on the solution. This idea holds no water. Water has no memory, but even if it did, why should it remember only the substance the homeopath has added? Why is there no memory of the hundreds of thousands of other substances that the water came into contact with in rivers, lakes and sewers? And why should a ghostly image of a molecule, even if such a thing did exist, have any curing ability?

Here’s a suggestion. Why not just add a bunch of homeopathic remedies to drinking water? They will become diluted and according to the tenets of homeopathy become more potent. Just drinking tap water should then resolve many ailments.

Obviously it’s easy to make fun of homeopathy. The concept is absurd. But millions of people around the world do rely on homeopathic medi-



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THE RIGHT CHEMISTRY

cations. Can they all be wrong? The simple answer is: Yes.

Popular ideas are not necessarily right. After all, bloodletting went on for thousands of years, and at one time the notion that Earth was the centre of the universe was quite popular. And today, many believe that the Earth was created less than 6,000 years ago. Science, though, is not a popularity contest. It relies on facts, not on opinion. And the fact is that homeopathic medications contain no active ingredients. And more important, while hundreds of studies on homeopathy have been published, there are no repeated trials that have provided proof of efficacy.

But while the tenets of homeopathy are marinated in pseudo-science, homeopaths can serve a useful function. They ask a plethora of caring questions and lend a sympathetic ear — processes that can translate to a reduction in stress and anxiety as the ailment naturally resolves. Add a dose of placebo and you’ve accounted for the success of homeopathy.

But problems can arise. And Health Canada’s Natural Health Products Directorate is partly to blame, by having given an uncritical free ride to homeopathic preparations — even issuing specific homeopathic drug-identification numbers.

It is hard to understand how this has happened, since the directorate’s stated goal is for “all Canadians (to) have ready access to natural health products that are safe, effective and high quality, while respecting freedom of choice and philosophical and cultural diversity.”

Safety is not an issue with homeopathic products, because they contain nothing. I’m not sure what “high quality” means in this context; presumably that the pills are produced in an environment free of contaminants. But what about efficacy? There is actually no requirement that homeopathic producers demonstrate this — which is lucky for them, because no proof of efficacy is to be had for homeopathic mercury, arsenic, “Berlin Wall” or, most alarmingly, homeopathic “vaccines” and mosquito repellents.

It seems that Health Canada has taken the view that freedom of

choice is paramount as long as there is no safety issue. When it comes to a question of efficacy, regulators conveniently look the other way. In most cases there is no issue because in general consumers who use homeopathic preparations do so for mild conditions such as colds or minor aches and pains.

But using homeopathic pills to deter insects from biting is potentially dangerous. That, however, is exactly what “Mozi-Q,” marketed as a natural homeopathic deterrent, claims to do. Swallow a sugar pill and keep mosquitoes away! Not only that; it is also supposed to reduce the itching if you do get bitten.

What evidence is provided? There’s talk of how mosquitoes avoid delphinium flowers, which may or may not be true. But what does that have to do with swallowing pills sprayed with an extremely dilute extract of the plant? Are the nonexistent delphinium molecules exuding through the skin? And itching is supposedly relieved because a pill contains a trace of stinging-nettle extract? According to the perverse theory of homeopathy, nettle causes stinging on contact with skin and therefore when diluted is a simple remedy for the same sensation. Simply asinine.

Mozi-Q also cites a reference to some homeopath who carried out a study in the 1960s — a study that cannot be found. What else? Supposedly Mozi-Q was tested over four seasons on people. How? Was there a control group? Why weren’t the results published?

Pity the poor person who goes into a mosquito-infected area thinking he or she is protected from bites by a sugar pill. And remember that mosquito bites can be more than minor annoyances; they can transfer disease, such as that caused by the West Nile virus. Health Canada thinks this is all right. It isn’t.

Given that the theory of homeopathy is based on the idea that the more dilute a preparation the more potent it is, will you overdose if you forget to take your pill? Of course not. The only risk with homeopathy is an overdose of nonsense.

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