



## The Skeptics SA guide to Homeopathy

**Homeopathy** is one of the variants of so-called ‘alternative’ medicine, and was developed in the early nineteenth century by Samuel Hahnemann, a German physician, who believed that substances which were able to produce symptoms in a healthy human being, could, after a specific process of dilution, relieve those symptoms in a sick person. He formulated homeopathy’s central principle: ‘*Similia similibus currentur*’ or ‘like should cure like’. The name homeopathy was derived by Hahnemann from Greek words meaning ‘similar sickness’.

Hahnemann believed that the therapeutic power of a substance lay not in its actual matter, but rather in a force or energy that resided in the matter. The theory was that through the process of specific serial dilutions the force or energy was liberated from its material base. As a result homeopathic preparations were felt to have therapeutic power, even though in many cases there were no longer any molecules of the initial substance left.

The effects of various substances on healthy persons were studied by Hahnemann and his associates, and the results were printed in a volume called the *Materia Medica*. The substance would be given in a non-diluted dose and a record would be made of all sensations

or symptoms that occurred over the next hours or days. This process became known as proving.

This process was based upon an important assumption: that what was reported had been caused by the substance. Even quite minor and arguably normal sensations that occurred many days after ingestion were attributed to the substance. For example, muriatic acid was associated with ‘dreams which are not remembered’, and dandelion was thought to be indicated if there was ‘loquacity and an inclination to laughter’.

During the mid-nineteenth century homeopathy became quite popular, and this is often used by proponents of the therapy as evidence of its efficacy. This is incorrect: homeopathy owed much of its popularity and its apparent benefits to the therapies being used at the time by regular doctors. During this time popular ‘orthodox’ therapies included bleeding (by incision, cupping or leeches), purging (usually with mercury containing compounds), and blistering. Doctor caused, or iatrogenic, illness became almost epidemic.

When patients rejected these dangerous therapies and opted instead for Hahnemann’s highly diluted preparations they were observed, in

many instances, to get better. Because their health had improved while they were taking the homeopathic remedy it was assumed that this had actively caused the improvement. In fact the patients were recovering because they were no longer being poisoned, or having their blood drained!

As medical knowledge advanced and the barbaric therapies were discarded homeopathy fell out of use, and by the early part of the twentieth century it was used by only a handful of practitioners compared to its peak. In recent times with the rise in interest in things labelled ‘natural’ homeopathy’s popularity has increased, and modern day supporters of this therapy simply gloss over, or even ignore, important details of its history.

In assessing the effectiveness of homeopathy it is important that a comparison be made with a standard treatment, placebo, or no treatment. A number of trials have been conducted that did this, and the picture that has emerged from these is that at present homeopathy is scientifically unproven.

Our current knowledge of chemistry and physics leads us to conclude that it is highly improbable that a preparation containing no molecules of the active substance will exert a

therapeutic effect, and the existing scientific research supports this view. This does not mean, though, that the Australian Skeptics are saying that such an effect does not exist, period. It means we are saying that it has not yet been shown to exist. In principle the claims of homeopathy could be confirmed through rigorous scientific studies, and these are required if its clinical usefulness is to be established. The onus of proof, as is standard in the world of science is with those who are claiming a benefit.

Until supportive evidence is available patients must be advised of homeopathy's unproven status. Practitioners who fail to advise patients of this may be subject to legal action if harm arises. All homeopathic preparations proposed for therapeutic use should be subjected to the same testing requirements of other drugs, and should not be released unless their efficacy can be established.

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