

Homeopathy—Part 1

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

The Basic Errors of Homeopathy¹

Discovering how homeopathy began is crucial to understanding why it is a false method of diagnosis and treatment. Homeopathy was developed by Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843). In 1810 Hahnemann published his *Organon of the Rational Art of Healing*,² the “Bible” of classical homeopathy.³ Editions today are frequently titled *Organon of Medicine*.

Hahnemann was a physician who had wisely rejected many of the somewhat barbaric medical practices of his day, but this left him without a profession. In order to support his family, he resorted to translating books into German and practicing other vocations. Nevertheless, he always retained his interest in medicine; for example, he experimented with drugs and conducted other research.

One day he was translating a book which had described the effects of quinine or Peruvian bark on malaria. Out of curiosity, Hahnemann took the drug himself and discovered that it appeared to cause symptoms similar to malaria: general malaise, chills, fever, etc. Hahnemann was struck with a revolutionary thought: The possibility that a substance which causes symptoms in a healthy person might cure those symptoms in a sick person. He therefore continued testing this idea on other substances using himself, his friends, and his family as subjects. Believing the results confirmed his theory, he developed the basic theory of homeopathy: “like cures like.” In other words, any substance producing symptoms in a healthy person similar to those symptoms in a sick person will cure the sick person.

The word “homeopathy” comes from two Greek words which reflect this basic idea; *Homoios*, meaning like or similar and *pathos* meaning pain or suffering. Homeopathic medicine, then, is that substance which produces similar *pain or suffering* in a healthy person to that experienced by a sick person. In Hahnemann’s own words:

By observation, reflection and experience, I discovered that, contrary to the old allopathic method, the true, the proper, the best mode of treatment is contained in the maxim: *To cure mildly, rapidly, certainly, and permanently, choose, in every case of disease, a medicine which can itself produce an affection similar to that sought to be cured!*

Hitherto no one has ever *taught* this homeopathic mode of cure, no one has *carried it out in practice*.⁴

Hahnemann proceeded to conduct experiments on other people by examining and recording their “reactions” to a wide variety of different substances. These were termed homeopathic “provings.” Once a particular item was given to a person, everything that happened to that person for a number of days or weeks (physically or mentally) was carefully observed and recorded as a supposed “effect” of that particular substance. Hahnemann also culled the literature of his day to see if similar effects had been noted by anyone else.

Over time, Hahnemann and his followers conducted an endless number of “provings,” administering minerals, herbs, and other substances to healthy persons, including themselves, and recording the alleged “actions” of these items. Each substance, of course, produced a large number of symptoms; according to Hahnemann’s research, the lowest was ninety-seven different symptoms, the highest being over fourteen hundred symptoms! With each new edition of his *Materia Medica Pura* the symptoms increased. As one biographer observed:

The number of medicinal manifestations he noted and recorded increased daily. While the first edition of his *Materia Medici Pura* contains information about six hundred and fifty proved reactions to belladonna, the number rises to 1422 in the second edition. In the same way, the figures for nux vomica mount from 961 to 1267, and the first edition’s 1073 citations for pulsatitia become 1163 in the second.

This method of homeopathic practice remains a unique psychic phenomenon. It goes far beyond the frontiers of what may be learned, and demands an almost oriental capacity for absorption and concentration.⁵

Eventually these records were compiled into a reference book, the homeopathic *Materia Medica* (Latin for “materials of medicine”), which lists the substances or “medicines,” giving a detailed account of the physical and mental symptoms they supposedly cause and will therefore supposedly cure.

But Hahnemann’s “discovery” of homeopathy was flawed from the start in at least eight major ways.

Misinterpretation

First, Hahnemann had apparently misinterpreted the symptoms he experienced after taking quinine. He thought they were symptoms of malaria, but they weren’t. “Hahnemann had taken quinine earlier in his life, and it is quite probable that his experiment had caused an allergic *reaction*, which can typically occur with the symptoms Hahnemann described. However, he interpreted them as malaria symptoms.”⁶

Thus, not surprisingly, the particular symptoms described have been unique to Hahnemann and a few other homeopaths. Those researchers outside of homeopathic ranks who tested quinine for similar symptoms have never been able to produce the effects that Hahnemann claimed. In other words, experiments using healthy test persons have never produced the symptoms Hahnemann claimed should be produced.

Lack of Independent Verification

The second problem was that the “provings” conducted by Hahnemann and other homeopaths and recorded in the *Materia Medica* have also never been capable of replication by non-homeopaths. In fact, only homeopaths appear to be able to produce the symptoms cited in their *Materia Medicas*. For example, as long ago as 1842, one hundred and fifty years ago, homeopathic “provings” were tested and failed to produce the symptoms homeopathy attributes to them. In a critical lecture series delivered in 1842, “Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions,” the famous Oliver Wendell Holmes, M.D., for thirty-five years an eminent anatomy professor at the Harvard Medical School, observed:

Now there are many individuals, long and well known to the scientific world, who have tried these experiments upon healthy subjects, and utterly deny that their effects have at all corresponded to Hahnemann’s assertions.

[The] distinguished physician [Andral] is Professor of Medicine in the School of Paris, and one of the most widely known and valued authors upon practical and theoretical subjects the profession can claim in

any country.... Assisted by a number of other persons in good health, he experimented on the effects of Cinchona [Peruvian bark], aconite, sulphur, arnica, and the other most highly extolled remedies. His experiments lasted a year, and he stated publicly to the Academy of Medicine that they never produced the slightest appearance of the symptoms attributed to them....

M. Double, a well-known medical writer and a physician of high ranking in Paris, had occasion so long ago as 1801, before he had heard of Homeopathy, to make experiments upon Cinchona, or Peruvian bark. He and several others took the drug in every kind of dose for four months, and the fever it is pretended by Hahnemann to excite never was produced.

M. Bonnet, president of the Royal Society of Medicine of Bordeaux, had occasion to observe many soldiers during the Peninsular War, who made use of Cinchona as a preservative against different diseases—but he never found it to produce the pretended paroxysms.

If any objection were made to evidence of this kind, I would refer to the express experiments on many of the Homeopathic substances, which were given to healthy persons with every precaution as to diet and regimen, by M. Louis Fleury, without being followed by the slightest of the pretended consequences.⁷

Lack of Sufficient Controls

A third major flaw was Hahnemann's basic method. He wrongly assumed that his own experimental safeguards proved that the particular substances actually had the observed effects. But his safeguards were ineffective, and he proved nothing. All that Hahnemann and earlier homeopaths observed was the normal variety of "symptoms" that any people would experience over a period of days or weeks, which were then falsely attributed to the substance itself.

In essence, the basic error of the *Materia Medica* is that the physical and mental symptoms that people would have normally experienced, even without the substance, were attributed to the effects of the substance itself. Remember, the substances themselves were often given in minuscule or non-existent doses, so how could they produce any symptoms at all? Further, these "provings" were carried out over days and weeks and the subjects themselves were told to *expect* symptoms:

Hahnemann seems to have somehow overlooked the fact that people regularly experience "symptoms," unusual physical and emotional sensations, whether taking drugs or other stimulants, or not—especially if they have been forewarned that the experimental pills that they have been given might, nay probably will, cause symptoms and that the symptoms might be mild and take several days or weeks to manifest themselves. Thus prepared by suggestion, Hahnemann's provers were inclined to regard the morning backache formerly charged to poor sleeping posture as a consequence of drugs....⁸

Consider the alleged "symptoms" of chamomilla as given by Hahnemann in his *Materia Medica Pura* (1846, Vol. 2, pp. 7-20): "Vertigo.... Dull....aching pain in the head.... Violent desire for coffee.... Grumbling and creeping in the upper teeth.... Great aversion to the wind.... Burning pain in the hand.... Quarrelsome, vexatious dreams.... heat and redness of the right cheek...."⁹

In fact, Hahnemann listed some *thirteen pages* of "symptoms" of chamomilla. Can it seriously be maintained that this substance will produce some thirteen pages of symptoms in healthy people? Or that it will cure these symptoms in the sick?

As medical historian Harris L. Coulter observes:

The allopathic physician takes a contrary view, feeling that the measurement of physiological and pathological parameters are more reliable guides to treatment precisely because they are "objective," while the "subjective" symptoms [of homeopathy] are too ephemeral and unstable to be reliable.¹⁰

(to be continued)

Notes:

- ¹ This information is extracted from John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *Can You Trust Your Doctor* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991) pp. 270-283, 315-319).
- ² Samuel Hahnemann, *Organon of Medicine*, 6th edition, reprint (New Dehli, India: B. Jain Publishers., 1978).
- ³ Hahnemann published his first work on homeopathy in 1805, although in 1796 he had published his first paper containing similar ideas (Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Homeopathy," in Douglas Stalker, Clark Glymour, eds., *Examining Holistic Medicine* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), p. 221).
- ⁴ Hahnemann, *Organon*, p. 80.
- ⁵ Martin Gumpert, *Hahnemann: The Adventurous Career of a Medical Rebel* (New York, NY: L. B. Fisher, 1945), p. 166.
- ⁶ Samuel Pfeifer, M.D., *Healing at Any Price?* (Milton Keynes, England: Word Limited, 1988), p. 65.
- ⁷ Holmes, "Homeopathy," p. 230.
- ⁸ James C. Whorton, "The First Holistic Revolution: Alternative Medicine in the Nineteenth Century in Stalker and Glymour, eds., *Examining Holistic Medicine*, pp. 31-32.
- ⁹ Douglas Stalker, Clark Glymour, eds., *Examining Holistic Medicine* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), p. 32; cf. David S. Sobel, ed., *Ways of Health: Wholistic Approaches to Ancient and Contemporary Medicine* (New York, NY :Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1979), pp. 295-297.
- ¹⁰ Sobel, ed., *Ways of Health*, p. 297.