

Abstracts

Homeopaths get stick in the UK

Udani Samarasekera, writing in *The Lancet*, reports that health service funding is being stopped for some homeopathic hospitals in the UK, following an active campaign by doctors and scientists. He asks if this signals the end of homeopathy in the UK's National Health Service.

The past 2 years have seen campaigning against homeopathy by journalists, doctors and scientists who point out the lack of evidence for its effectiveness. They are particularly concerned about its availability on the NHS. A recent symposium on the role of homeopathy in HIV was a particular cause for concern, leading to fears that homeopaths may be becoming overconfident about what they can treat. There are further concerns about homeopaths offering homeopathic pills against malaria and other tropical diseases such as typhoid, dengue fever and yellow fever, potentially amounting to false claims about treatment.

The homeopathic market in the UK is predicted to become worth £46 million by 2012, but referrals to the Royal Homeopathic Hospital in London are down and NHS funding for the Tunbridge Wells Homeopathic Hospital has been stopped. Homeopathy, which has been available on the NHS since it began in 1948, remains ever popular with the UK public. Around 13 000 patients are treated at the 5 homeopathic hospitals each year, and 14.5% of the population say they trust homeopathic medicines. According to the market research group Mintel, the homeopathy market is estimated to be worth £38 million.

The rationale behind the objections is that homeopathic treatments are based on solutions that are so dilute that not a single active ingredient remains. Homeopaths believe that dilution increases, rather than decreases, the strength of a remedy. However, a meta-analysis published in *The Lancet* in 2005 and 4 other large meta-analyses, found that the clinical effects of homeopathy were no greater than those of placebo—causing great controversy among those who espouse the benefits of homeopathy.

Samarasekera U. *Lancet* 2007; 370: 1677-1678.

But are welcomed in India

On the other hand, according to Raekha Prasad, writing in the same issue of *The Lancet*, homeopathy is a national medicine system in India, the market is growing at 25% a year and more than 100 million people depend on this form of therapy for their health care.

The story of a poor farmer in the western Indian state of Maharashtra is worrying. Diagnosed as HIV positive, he responded in desperation to an advertisement in a local newspaper placed by a homeopathic doctor, who said he had found a cure for the virus. For 1 year, he took the drug administered by the homeopath at his private clinic. He sold his tractor to raise the 150 000 rupees (US \$3 800) to pay for the so-called miracle cure that the homeopath named HIV-SJ. During that year, his condition deteriorated.

India has the world's third highest caseload of HIV/AIDS after Nigeria and South Africa. This particular homeopathic clinic drew in hundreds – all of whom had seen

one of its leaflets or read its website that claimed the homeopath had cured 4 000 people with HIV in the past 2 years. Last month, the law finally caught up with the homeopath and he was prohibited from advertising the fanciful claims. He is currently under investigation by medical authorities.

But, in spite of the publicity that this case drew, for around 10% of India's population homeopathy is their sole form of medical treatment. Homeopathy has the third largest government-supported infrastructure after ayurvedic and modern medicine. There are around 11 000 homeopathic hospital beds in India and three-quarters of India's homeopathic practitioners were trained by the state. All medical students, conventional and otherwise, share the first 3 years of training. Homeopathic practitioners also charge less than half what conventional doctors do – further increasing their popularity. Homeopathy is also seen as harmless – fine if you are talking about the common cold, but rather more of a problem with HIV and malaria.

Part of homeopathy's attraction in India is that it sits well with the country's established indigenous ancient medicine, although it was introduced to the country by German missionaries 200 years ago. But, in India homeopaths and ayurvedic practitioners have access to and prescribe conventional drugs, which has led to the death of patients in some instances. Homeopathy is often the only treatment available to the poor, while India's wealthy see it as a route to wellbeing – in much the same way as complementary remedies are used by wealthy people in the West.

Prasad R. *Lancet* 2007; 370: 1679-1680.

BRIDGET FARHAM