

Chapter 2

Definition and Main Principles of Homeopathy

Despite the current popularity of homeopathy, many people fail to understand what it really is. A UK survey, for instance, suggested that 40% of the public thought homeopathy meant ‘natural or *herbal medicine*’. This is not just misleading; it is, as we will see, quite simply incorrect. But how can we define homeopathy? As it turns out, a good *definition of homeopathy* is more difficult to provide than anticipated.

One might simply state that homeopathy is the school of medicine that was first developed by Samuel *Hahnemann* (1755–1843). However, this would tell us very little about the nature of homeopathy. My American Illustrated Medical Dictionary from 1927, a time when homeopathy was still fairly popular in the US, offers a much more practical definition:

Homeopathy is a system of therapeutics founded by Samuel Christian Fredrich Hahnemann based on the following theories: first, the doctrine of signatures, namely, that diseases are curable by those drugs which produce effects on the body similar to the symptoms of the disease (*similia similibus currantur*); second, that the effects of drugs are increased by giving them in minute doses, which are to be obtained by carrying dilution or trituration to an extreme limit; third, the notion that most chronic diseases are only a manifestation of suppressed itch or psora.

A more recent and more authoritative definition was published in the *International Dictionary of Homeopathy*: it states that homeopathy is

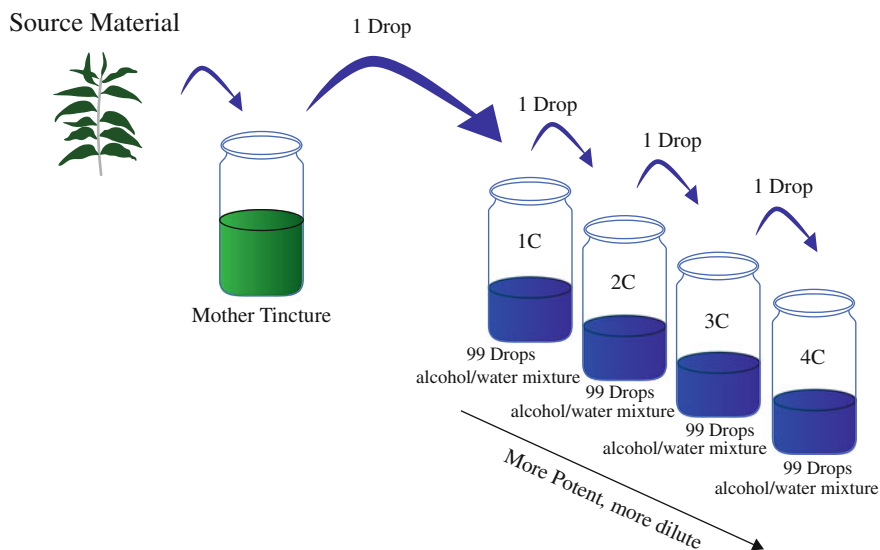
[...] a therapeutic method using substances whose effects, when administered to healthy subjects, correspond to the manifestations of the disorder in the individual patient.

This sentence does describe homeopathy accurately, but it is perhaps too academic to be easily understood. It might be simpler to say that homeopathy is the use of homeopathic remedies for medicinal purposes. This, of course, would beg the question, what is a homeopathic remedy? The answer is easy, albeit not very enlightening; the International Dictionary of Homeopathy informs us that a homeopathic remedy is a

medicinal agent which has been manufactured according to a method stipulated in a homeopathic *pharmacopoeia*. To explain this a bit better, it might be advisable to go gently, step by step.

Many people believe that homeopathic remedies are all based on plants and other natural substances. The truth, however, is that they can be made from almost any material; some are even based on immaterial sources such as *X-rays*. As many are made from plant extracts, and I will use plants as an example to explain briefly how homeopathic remedies are manufactured. More details on the various processes and phenomena involved in the manufacture of homeopathic preparations can be found in the following chapters and in the second part of this book (Fig. 2.1).

Homeopaths call the original plant extract for the production of a remedy a *mother tincture*. This name is fitting: the mother tincture can ‘give birth’ to a countless amount of further remedies. Most, but not all, homeopathic remedies are diluted several times—homeopaths speak of *serial dilution*—in a process called *potentisation* or *dynamisation*. This means that some homeopathic remedies (the ones that are not highly diluted) do contain plenty of material from the mother tincture, while many more are so highly diluted that they contain only a few molecules, and most homeopathic remedies are far too dilute to contain even a single molecule of the mother tincture. A C1 *potency*, for instance, is a 1:100 dilution of the mother tincture, while a C10 potency signifies a dilution of 1 part of mother tincture in 100 000 000 000 000 000 000 parts of *diluent*.



Each vial is shaken vigorously after each dilution is made.

Fig. 2.1 Potentisation. This process involves serial dilutions with succussion at each step

If the plant extract in the mother tincture happens to be toxic—many substances used in homeopathy are very poisonous indeed—a C1 potency could easily generate quite serious side-effects. But normally, homeopathic remedies are sold in high potencies (C30 is probably the most popular potency and describes a dilution at the ratio of 1:1 000), which should be entirely free of side-effects, even if its mother tincture is as toxic as *arsenic*, which happens to be a popular homeopathic remedy.

What follows from all this is actually quite simple: most homeopathic remedies are given in high potencies which contain not enough molecules to cause harm. However, this does not mean that low potencies are necessarily harmless as well. In other words, the vast majority of homeopathic remedies cannot cause side-effects, but some undoubtedly have the potential to cause harm.

The practice of homeopathy is based on three unique and entirely independent assumptions—homeopaths like to think of them as *laws*—which were all developed by Samuel Hahnemann, homeopathy's founder.

2.1 Like Cures Like

Homeopathy is first and foremost based on the *like cures like principle* formulated by Hahnemann as 'simila similibus currentur' (strictly speaking this should not be translated as 'like cures like', but by the subjunctive 'let like be cured by like'). The principle—in fact, it is more an assumption than a principle—holds that, if a substance causes a set of symptoms in a healthy person, it can serve as a remedy for treating these symptoms when they occur in a patient. In the words of Hahnemann:

Every medicine which [...] reproduces most of [the symptoms] present in a given disease, is capable of curing that disease.

Hahnemann called his discovery an 'eternal, universal *law* of nature.'

A few examples might explain the *law of similars*, as it is often called, better than long theoretical elaborations:

- A typical homeopathic treatment for hay fever would be a preparation of onion. Onions can make our eyes water, which is of course a symptom of hay fever.
- Coffee can keep us awake. A typical homeopathic remedy for insomnia is therefore based on coffee.
- A more exotic, but nevertheless real, example is the homeopathic remedy known as *Berlin wall*. The Berlin wall inhibited communication between people. For homeopaths, this is an indication that a remedy made from fragments of the original Berlin wall can cure a patient's communication problems.

The main problem here is that homeopaths see the like cures like principle as a true law of nature. Few people would deny that, under certain circumstances, a small dose of a substance that caused ill effects can reduce the harm. For instance, some people feel much improved when they drink a glass of beer after an alcoholic excess the

night before. Like might cure like in very special situations, but it is not a law that is applicable to all substances and all situations.

Hahnemann developed some rather vague ideas as to how his remedies might bring about the clinical improvements which he thought he observed in his patients. Following his logic of like cures like, he believed that homeopathic remedies cause a set of symptoms, not just in healthy volunteers, but also in patients receiving homeopathic treatments. He called this an *artificial disease*, and postulated that this artificial disease would stimulate the patient's *vital force*, which would in turn defeat the patient's real disease. For this to happen, the artificial disease needed to be as similar as possible to the real disease affecting the patient.

2.2 Less Is More

As already mentioned, many mother tinctures used in homeopathy are toxic; examples include *arsenic*, lead, or strychnine. For homeopaths, poisonous substances do not necessarily present a problem, because they dilute their remedies multiple times (*serial dilution*). At each dilution step, they shake them vigorously. Homeopaths call this process of shaking a remedy *succussion*, and the process of serial dilution together with the shaking is called *potentisation* or *dynamisation*. As implied by the term 'potentisation', homeopaths are convinced that this unique method of preparing their remedies renders them not less but more potent. They speak of the *law of infinitesimals*.

Initially, the dilution was aimed purely at avoiding toxicity of the ingredient. Later, Hahnemann became convinced that the process transfers some information or *vital energy* from the less to the more dilute remedy. In this way, homeopaths believe, the diluent retains important properties of the mother tincture, even when all of this material has disappeared during serial dilutions, a phenomenon which is often referred to as the *memory of water*.

In Hahnemann's own words:

[...] the power of a medicine in solution is much increased by intimate mixture with a large volume of fluid.

And elsewhere he stated that

[...] as the smallest quantity of medicine naturally disturbs the organism least, we should choose the very smallest doses, provided always that they are a match for the disease [...] hardly any dose of the homeopathically selected remedy can be so small as not to be stronger than the natural disease.

Hahnemann came to believe that the healing power of his remedies did not depend on the substances contained in them, but that their "action must be called spirit-like".

2.3 Miasm Theory of Disease

The third main assumption of homeopathy is perhaps the most complex. It is also the one that many of today's homeopaths hesitate to believe in. It is the notion that all human diseases are caused by *miasms*, noxious vapours or atmospheres.

Hahnemann postulated the existence of three such entities: the *psoric*, *sycotic*, and *syphilitic* miasms. The most important miasm by far is the *psora*-miasm. In Hahnemann's opinion, *psora* was responsible for seven-eighths of all human diseases, while the venereal miasms, *syphilis* and *sycosis*, were the cause of all the remaining conditions:

Psora is the sole true and fundamental cause that produces all the other countless forms of disease, which, under the names of nervous debility, hysteria, hypochondriasis, insanity, melancholy, idiocy, madness, epilepsy, and spasms of all kinds, softening of the bones, or rickets, scoliosis and cyphosis, caries, cancer, fungus haematodes, gout—yellow jaundice and cyanosis, dropsy—gastralgia, epistaxis, haemoptysis—asthma and suppuration of the lungs—megrim, deafness, cataract and amaurosis—paralysis, loss of sense, pains of every kind, etc., appear in our pathology as so many peculiar, distinct, and independent diseases.

Chronic diseases are, according to Hahnemann, the result of the invasion of the body by miasms through the skin. If left untreated or—much worse in Hahnemann's view—suppressed by *allopathic* treatments, the miasms would spread throughout the body and cause chronic diseases. These conditions would often occur only years later. In order to prevent this course of events, many homeopaths employ anti-*psoric* remedies, the most important of which is sulphur.

Hahnemann interpreted miasm as an infection or a cloud full of illness-causing elements. In this way, Hahnemann might even have anticipated the *germ theory of disease* as well as important principles of immunity and disease prevention, all of which were formulated only well after his death. This seems particularly clear in Hahnemann's comments about cholera:

On board of ships [...] the cholera miasm finds a favourable element for its multiplication, and grows into an enormously increased brood of those excessively minute, invisible, living creatures [...] of which the contagious matter of the cholera most probably consists [...] this concentrated aggravated miasm kills several of the crew; the others, however, being frequently exposed to the danger of infection [...] become fortified against it and no longer liable to be infected.

It has to be said, however, that Hahnemann's voluminous writings are by no means free of contradictions about many issues, and the subject of miasm is no exception: elsewhere he speaks of miasm as disease patterns which are not transmitted but inherited.

In addition to these three main assumptions, Hahnemann formulated numerous further rules and concepts he wanted his followers to adhere to. For instance, he believed that we cannot understand the nature of a disease. Therefore, disease is best described by the range of symptoms it produces. He also insisted that, in order not to jeopardise the success of homeopathic remedies, nothing should interfere with their actions.

This meant that patients were forbidden to ingest stimulants like coffee, spices, alcohol, or conventional medicines while taking homeopathic remedies. The latter point is particularly important, as it renders Hahnemann's homeopathy a truly *alternative medicine*, a therapy that replaces all others. Hahnemann was adamant that homeopathy was not to be combined with other forms of health care; he even called homeopaths who failed to obey to this rule 'traitors'.



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