

Homeopathy: the lure of the unknown

Shima Gyoh yearns for better primary care services to persuade people away from traditional and homeopathic medicine



There are three types of health services in Africa. The first is traditional medicine that evolved as part of the culture of the people. It incorporates faith in traditional myths and spiritualism and therefore greatly varies with each ethnic group, often from clan to clan. It has no pretension to science; on the contrary, its practitioners usually claim to tap from powerful spiritual secrets beyond the reaches of science. The second type is orthodox medicine as established throughout the developed world, based on scientific principles and usually acquired through university education and training. The hope that it would largely displace other practices has not been realised in our countries because of its expense and inadequate funding, and this drives the population to seek alternative reliefs, among which is homeopathy.

The practice of homeopathy hinges on three pillars: the 'laws' of similarities, infinitesimals and succussion. Similarities postulates that 'like cures like'; the cure of diseases lie in their causative agents, thus the treatment for pneumococcal pneumonia would be the administration of homeopathic dilution of the pneumococcus. That dilution is done in accordance with the law of infinitesimals whereby one volume of the agent is diluted in 99 volumes of distilled water or alcohol; this is repeated 30 times. Although the solution or centesimal may become so dilute that a litre no longer contains a molecule of the supposedly curative substance, homeopathy claims that its potency actually increases through 'memory' imparted to the solution by succussion or vigorous shaking applied at each dilution by hitting with a leather-bound book. Such 'signature memory' and other crucial claims of homeopathy are not amenable to any type of scientific verification; they have to be accepted on the basis of faith.

Homeopaths claim that Hippocrates originated the practice in about 400 BC, but it was in 1807 that Samuel Hahnemann coined the name. He ingested the bark of the cinchona tree, the known cure for malaria and developed symptoms similar to malaria with fever, rigors and joint pains. He became convinced that drugs that cured disease would produce the disease in healthy subjects. By the time cinchona's content of quinine known to kill *Plasmodia*, the real cause of malaria was known, his 'law of similars' had taken root. He proposed that the underlying causes of all diseases were three inherent but transmissible susceptibilities called *miasms*: psora (itch), syphilis and sycosis (gonorrhoea).

Shima Gyoh has held many posts ranging from village doctor to DG of Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Health and Chair of the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria.

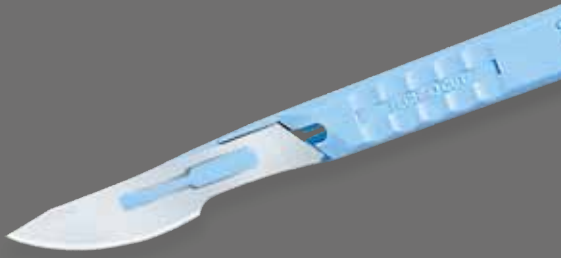
Homeopathy became popular and well-established in the nineteenth century. Its outcomes were better than other methods of disease management that were dominated by blood-letting and other unsatisfactory disease management, particularly infections. The second half of the twentieth century marked the development of modern medicine based on sound scientific principles of personal and public hygiene, the discovery of such wonder drugs as antibiotics, a vast array of diagnostic and therapeutic gadgets leading to vastly improved outcomes, and the scales became highly tipped the other way. Several trials of homeopathic remedies have not shown any benefit beyond the placebo effect, yet homeopathy has continued to survive, its fortunes even showed some improvement in the early half of the 20th century. Its presentations are wrapped in a pseudoscientific aura that can easily hoodwink the uninitiated. Use of Latin terms is profuse, and simple table salt becomes *natrum muriaticum*, and in medicine people tend to respect doctors whose language is unintelligible. Its literature tends to misrepresent other remedies to emphasise the superiority of its own.

One needs a fairly malleable credulity to accept many homeopathic nostrums. Some are made from nosodes—diseased or pathological specimens: faecal, urine, or respiratory discharges. Sarcodes are nostrums made from healthy tissue and 'imponderables' are alcohol or lactose based 'captured X-rays' or 'sunlight!' Other practices include written prescriptions patients have to carry on their persons, or put in glasses of water, others are 'manufactured by radionics'. It is only fair to state that not all practitioners accept these bizarre claims.

The continuing participation of governments in the practices of homeopathy is causing some concern in many countries. The remedies do not live up to the claims of their vendors, thereby violating the regulations on false advertisements. Many governments in the developed world have therefore withdrawn recognition and demanded that homeopathic drugs must bear labels stating that they are inefficacious.

The ground for homeopathy is more fertile in developing countries with large populations of superstitious people with little access to effective orthodox health-care. Homeopathy's pseudoscientific posture gives the impression of being superior to traditional and even orthodox remedies. It can delay serious organic diseases getting early medical attention. Banning the practice is not the best way, but the public should be properly educated on it. Provision of excellent primary healthcare services remains the best way to limit the prevalence of inappropriate medical practices in our environment.

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