

Can watered-down toxins trigger immune response?



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Homeopathy may provide some of the most powerful, simple, safe and low-cost medical treatment of any of today's alternative care options, yet no one knows how it works.

In fact, many people don't even know that it exists. Finding a physician who practices homeopathic medicine can be difficult. Many doctors consider homeopathy a "smoke and mirrors" scam devoid of scientific proof. Few mainstream physicians refer patients to homeopaths. Finding insurance coverage for homeopathy is nearly impossible. Simply put, homeopathy is a form of treatment involving administering minute, vastly diluted doses of a remedy that in healthy persons would produce symptoms of the disease being treated.

Introducing substances that create tearing eyes and a runny nose, for instance, stimulates the body's immune system to react in ways that attack the same symptoms of a person's cold and the healing process begins, homeopaths believe.

In recent years, more physicians are including homeopathy in their practices. And homeopathy is among the alternative health-care treatments being studied by the National Institutes of Health's new Office for the Study of Unconventional Medical Practices.

Dr. Jennifer Jacobs, an M.D. who practices homeopathic medicine at the Evergreen Clinic in Edmonds and is a member of the advisory committee for the federal government's new Office of Alternative Medicine, has been conducting studies of the effectiveness of homeopathy in other parts of the world.

Her research work in Nicaragua, reported in the May 1994 issue of the scientific journal *Pediatrics*, found homeopathic treatments reduced the duration of dysentery in children by as much as 20 percent. She's now evaluating similar studies she conducted in Nepal.

"During my training and residency as a family practitioner, I didn't like the side effects of many of the drugs I prescribed," says Jacobs, who has been using homeopathy in her practice for the past 15 years. "I began looking for more natural types of medicine that

would stimulate the body's own healing system. The amazing results encouraged me to use homeopathy further."

One time, when her daughter fell and bruised her knee, Jacobs treated it with a homeopathic solution of arnica plant. Instead of a swollen knee that would normally have lasted five to six days, the injury cleared up within a few hours, she says.

Jacobs, who is also a University of Washington clinical assistant professor of epidemiology, says homeopathy could create a revolution in medicine if people understood and used it more.

Not being able to understand how and why homeopathy works is a frustration to many medical researchers and physicians, although Jacobs notes that physicians seem to have no problem with using Ritalin, a stimulant, to calm hyperactive children even though researchers don't know why it works.

Homeopathic physicians don't claim that homeopathy will eliminate the need for hospitals, surgery or even the drugs that are so often doctors' weapons of choice against disease, aches and pains.

But they believe too much money is being spent on ineffective treatments of a wide range of illnesses and maladies that could be cured more easily and more cheaply with homeopathy, which is known in Europe as "complementary medicine," a kinder term perhaps than "alternative" or "unconventional" medicine.

Nausea, sprains, seasickness, colds, flus, teething, diarrhea and hay fever are among the problems commonly treated with homeopathy but remedies even show curable impacts on arthritis and such intangible, emotional conditions as grief.

"Homeopathic treatments strengthen the whole immune system," says Fred Bishop, executive director of the nonprofit International Foundation for Homeopathy in Seattle.

The foundation provides homeopathy books and brochures, referrals to homeopathic physicians and training courses for the medical profession. Homeopathic concepts and treatments can be used by anyone licensed to practice medicine, include M.D.'s, naturopaths, osteopaths, chiropractors, licensed acupuncturists, nurses and physician assistants.

Suffering from arthritis so badly at age 30 that he had difficulty getting out of bed and could hardly walk, Bishop began his own homeopathic treatments. Today, at 46, he bikes over Seattle's hills and says he has more stamina and productivity than he had at 30.

Homeopathic medications, produced by fewer than a half-dozen pharmaceutical companies in the nation and regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, are highly diluted solutions of substances derived from plants and herbs.

Medicinal properties of arnica, for instance, which grows in high mountain regions, can be dissolved in water and then reduced to pills that have a slight sugary taste and no negative side effects. Arnica is used to treat traumatic injuries such as having a cement block dropped on a foot.

"Not only does arnica reduce swelling and promote healing, it also takes the pain away faster than conventional medications and reduces the emotional component -- fear, anxiety and shock. That's typical of the effects of homeopathic remedies," says Bishop.

Like herbal medicine, homeopathic remedies are derived from natural substances such as chamomile and wild hops. Homeopaths believe that symptoms of disease, such as fever, are signs that the body's natural defenses are working.

Natural substances that produce the same symptoms as the patient is suffering, they contend, can help the body fight disease. The concept is similar to the practice of vaccinations, which use bacteria or viruses to trigger the immune system's natural defenses.

But unlike herbal formulations, homeopathic cures are diluted thousands of times in distilled water. The more a substance is diluted, say homeopaths, the stronger its effect becomes.

Critic William Jarvis, president of the National Council Against Health Fraud and a researcher at Loma Linda University in California, notes that many of the studies that seem to prove the effectiveness of homeopathy were conducted by homeopaths.

Further, he says, the thought that diminishing a substance makes it stronger is counter to the tenets of fundamental physics. Homeopathic remedies are often diluted to the point where not even a single molecule of the original medicinal ingredient remains.

Fred Bishop explains the unknown process with his theory that the vigorous shaking and pounding necessary during manufacturing creates a solution that holds an imprint of the energy of the original substance, which remains in the watery solution as the effective ingredient that triggers the body's immune system.

"Homeopathic medications are on the fringe, unconventional. They don't follow standard medical philosophy," says Bishop, who is not a physician. "Yet we have more than 200 years of knowledge that tells us this is incredible stuff. Today, people are scrambling to homeopathy, acupuncture and other methods that are not generally accepted in American medical practice.

"But people are often skeptical, too, because it's easy to find quackery and deception in such fringe treatments."

Homeopathy getting some respect

In Seattle, traditionally conservative Blue Cross of Washington and Alaska is offering what is believed to be the nation's first health-care policy covering alternative medical treatments, including homeopathy.

AlternaPath is a pilot program launched quietly by Blue Cross last May, limited to only 1,000 patients in north King and south Snohomish counties. The giant health insurer didn't want extensive publicity for such a small project. If it gets good results and responses from the public, Blue Cross intends to consider adding an alternative-medicine plan to its regular health-care coverage.

The test plan has no deductible and Blue Cross pays for 80 percent of the costs of treatment from 13 licensed medical-care providers who practice homeopathy. For \$170 a year, the pilot plan offers up to \$1,000 in coverage. Blue Cross knows of no similar plans elsewhere in the nation.

Coverage in the pilot policy provides access to the AlternaPath Network of naturopathic doctors, homeopathic physicians and acupuncturists who provide preventive health care, dietary and nutritional counseling, stress management, smoking cessation, relaxation therapy, pain control and other services.

"Instead of opposing alternative medicine, more people, including physicians, are looking at ways it can be used to complement conventional American medicine," says Sydney Zvara, manager of strategic alliances and projects at Blue Cross.

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