

When a remedy contains medicine

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HOMEOPATHIC remedies claim to cure all kinds of ills, from fever to depression. Exactly how they heal has always defied conventional scientific logic, as their “active” ingredient is present in such small amounts as not to be active—the more diluted the substance, according to homeopaths, the more powerful it becomes. American regulators allow the sale of homeopathic products, but do not require them to meet any standard for efficacy. That serves manufacturers well, as most homeopathic remedies consist of sugar or water.

This month, however, a company called Terra-Medica got in trouble with American regulators. The firm’s problem? Containing medicine. Terra-Medica’s Pleo products are supposed to ease digestion, colds and fungal infections, as well as prevent viruses and treat their symptoms—an impressive list, no doubt. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced on March 18th that Terra-Medica would recall 56 lots of its Pleo products. The FDA had found these to contain penicillin or derivatives of it.

Homeopathic remedies do bring some tiny benefit: they are as effective as a placebo. If they contain actual pharmacological ingredients, however, they might do real harm. Americans spent \$2.9 billion on homeopathic medicines and \$170m on visits to homeopathic practitioners, according to a national survey in 2007.