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Homeopathy

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Homeopathy

Charles Volk

In 1860, the incoming class to the New York Homeopathic Medical College sat down to become specialists in their chosen form of medicine, homeopathy. At the time it was a completely reputable form of medicine, equal to or better than the more conventional medicine of the day. Indeed, a homeopathic physician would often garner a larger salary in the western United States than a physician who used the strong laxatives and heavy metals that were used in conventional medicine of the time. The US was very welcoming of homeopathy, founding the American Institute of Homeopathy in 1844. The conventional physicians, in response to the homeopaths, made their own institute a couple of years later: The American Medical Association.

The homeopaths gave conventional medicine a name to differentiate themselves and their form of medicine. They called conventional medicine “allopathy,” and although the term is antiquated, it seems to have stuck. This is actually a rivalry in medicine that has been going on since the time of Hippocrates. There’s an idea that if a person has a condition, a physician can do one of two things:

1) Give them a compound that causes an opposite problem. For example: If a person has diarrhea, give them something that causes constipation. You give them something that would cause opposite suffering; allopathy.

2) Give them a compound that causes a similar problem. For example: If a person has diarrhea, give them an extremely small dose of something that causes diarrhea. Similar suffering; homeopathy.



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New York Homeopathic Medical College continued to churn out homeopathic physicians for many years. However, by the end of the 19th century, new discoveries, an increasing trust in the scientific process, and disagreements among homeopathic practitioners were starting to sound a death knell for homeopathy in the United States. The curriculum at New York Homeopathic Medical College had integrated new discoveries in medicine and science since its charter class, and once medical education in the US became more homogenized around the turn of the 20th century, its classes largely resembled those found at any contemporary Allopathic medical school. By 1910, as the popularity of homeopathy in the US dwindled and confidence in Allopathic medicine increased, New York Homeopathic Medical College changed its name to New York Medical College and the degree it offered to an Allopathic Medical Doctor. A little less than a century later, homeopathy enjoys a resurgence in the US, with a half dozen schools in the country. However, while the homeopathic medical education of the past encompassed new discoveries in its teaching, modern homeopathy has taken a completely different angle.

My experiment with homeopathy started with a book on natural health for dogs and cats. In the book, the author introduced many “natural” ways to keep pets healthy, but the one he espoused the most was homeopathy. I started looking further into it and became fascinated with what I saw. After experimenting on myself and on willing family and friends (my dad still takes the homeopathic remedy I got him for his bursitis), I was hooked. I found out about a homeopathic medical school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and after a year of college was accepted into the class of 2009.

The first day of class started at 8AM on a frigid Minnesota January morning. The building I walked into was rented out to practitioners of the entire spectrum of complementary medicine. It felt like stepping back in time; herbs smoldering, strange esoteric compounds being displayed and archaic rituals being performed to heal diseases I didn’t even know existed. And there, at the end of the top floor hallway, was my homeopathic medical school classroom.

It seemed like the room hadn’t changed much since the late 1800s: old woodwork, ancient blackboards, and colossal iron radiators. I took a front corner seat close to a power outlet (for my laptop) which had the unintended side effect of allowing me to see both the faces of my classmates and the professor at the same time. More on this later.

The room eventually filled up with the other 30 students, and I noticed that I was the youngest person there by at least ten years. After some administrative stuff, we were all asked one-by-one to stand in front of the class and tell everyone how we were “called” to homeopathy. I was incredibly uncomfortable with this, as I didn’t feel “called” to anything. The term evokes a certain amount of *fait accompli* of the universe; that my decision to study homeopathy could only be explained by supernatural means. What it really reminded me of was Catholic school. Once it was my turn, I just got up and explained how I thought homeopathy was very interesting, and how I thought I could really delve into the subject to come up with knowledge to make people better. I specifically left “God told me to” out of it.

The first teacher brought my hopes up slightly, talking about what anyone in medicine could agree on, but the next teacher then started talking deeply about philosophy. He claimed that you have to be a philosopher to get homeopathy, and you could only be a great homeopath if you tweak your worldview. The phrase “tweak your worldview” was said to me dozens of times, and it grew old very quickly.

I’m not really one for extended philosophical musings. Nights wiled away in a heated discussion about our role in the universe just never really held too much interest for me. I always found that learning about the natural world was always far more interesting than debating on existentialism. I always felt that I existed because billions of years of evolution had by chance created me. If it hadn’t, I wouldn’t be around to think about it. So, I guess my worldview is that of “things exist that I can interact with or detect,” better known as “the materialistic worldview.”

“The greatest problem with modern medicine and science is that it only believes in the materialistic worldview,” the teacher says.

So it begins.

He claimed that homeopathy is spiritual energy. Later, another instructor claimed it was “energy medicine” somewhere in the realm of electromagnetism. Another invoked quantum mechanics (but couldn’t explain it, of course). If one read 100 authors books on homeopathy, one would get 100 different mechanisms for its action. It seems to be one of those disciplines that constantly lie in the gaps of scientific knowledge. If one gap is closed by legitimate research, it’ll move on to another.

I think it behooves me here to take a little foray into exactly “what are homeopathics?”

Homeopathic remedies are made by a certain process of dilution and shaking to “potentize” them. Let me take you through making one, step by step: First get your original product, for example, venom from the Bushmaster snake. Take one drop of the snake venom and put it in 99

drops of a water/ethanol mixture. Shake this mixture 40 times, then take one drop of that mixture and put it into 99 drops of water. Shake 40 times. Repeat with 28 more dilutions and shakes, and you have the remedy Lachesis 30C. The 30C means 30 1/100 dilutions.

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Now, you are probably thinking that there can’t be anything left of that snake venom. In fact, the mathematics of dilution (thanks, Avogadro!) state that there cannot be anything left of the original compound after twelve 1/100 dilutions, but the practitioners of homeopathy claim the more they dilute it, the better it seems to work. The basic idea is that it causes the opposite reaction of the toxin or herb

in its full dose. For example, if one would take the belladonna herb and rub it on one’s skin, it would become very red, hot, and painful. The belladonna remedy helps remove afflictions with similar symptoms, like sunburn. Although occasionally, some herbs are used for the same conditions that their full strength counterparts are used for. It seems to be that if an herb has a large alternative medicine following, a homeopathic preparation of the herb does the exact same thing, just *better*.

Homeopathics are prescribed in an extremely convoluted and seemingly contradictory fashion. Sometimes they operate in the opposite fashion from the large dose. Sometimes they have the same effect. Sometimes you are supposed to find the “constitutional type” a person is, and that remedy is the only thing that will heal them. I figured my confusion was only due to naïveté, and would disappear when I had learned more about it.

Luckily, they also offer combination remedies, which have a number of different homeopathic remedies in them that are commonly used for whatever disease. It takes much of the guesswork out of it (have the flu? Use flu!), though they are supposedly less effective than the

single remedies. No one could seem to explain why. My guess was that it would put homeopaths out of a job.

I should also mention that with the exception of some occasional small, poorly constructed drug efficacy studies, there are currently no scientifically accepted trials that show homeopathy has any effectiveness beyond placebo, and in fact, a general tendency towards the placebo response as methodological controls get more precise. There are individual trials that have shown the effectiveness of homeopathics, but none have been reproducible. However, there is some lab-based evidence that shows some cellular response to ultra-diluted compounds similar to homeopathics, as well as an immense amount of anecdotal evidence for its effectiveness. *(A complete discussion of the evidence for and against homeopathy is beyond the scope of this essay. I would direct readers to the article on homeopathy in the Skeptic's Dictionary at <http://www.skepdic.com/homeo.html>)*

A little later into the discussion on that first day, I raised my hand, "What was all that about germs not causing disease?"

"They don't," the teacher answers.

My vantage point at the front corner meant I could see people's faces and reactions whenever a barrage of questionable information began. The sheer number of people in that class that had a look of "Well, of course they don't. Everyone knows that" was disheartening in a way I can't quite describe. The instructor backed it up by saying, "Viruses and bacteria are scavengers of diseased tissue. A miasm (literally meaning "evil spirit." Seriously.) has to cause disease first, and only then can the microorganisms cause tissue damage." If you roll this around in your head for a while, it makes a weird sort of sense, but then I remember a man named Louis Pasteur proved that microorganisms, not miasms, caused disease over 150 years ago. We're way past arguing the accuracy of the germ theory in the 21st century.

“ *Soon enough, the very idea of the scientific method came under attack.* **”**

The lead instructor also said that homeopathics can cure bad luck. Another claim was that heredity is mostly energy (the teacher's percentages were about 5% DNA and 95% energy). There was a point in there somewhere about rocks causing disease, which was then paralleled with the Christian idea of original sin. Again, my incredulousness was only matched by the agreeing nods of my classmates as they listened to his lecture.

Soon enough, the very idea of the scientific method came under attack. He claimed that the entire idea of scientific theories was wrong. "The average life of a scientific theory is five years," "All the scientists just go running from one theory to another," and "You know, theory comes from the Greek word for theater." Actually, *theory* comes from the Greek word for "spectator" or "observer." I called him out on that after class and he claimed that, "spectator is

what I meant.” despite it completely changing the meaning of his damning appraisal of science.

The teacher made an announcement (actually several) to those people who were perhaps having some trouble believing any of this (me). It was that we should “Put off our reasoning minds for awhile and make a space for homeopathy.” This is not something that I have much experience doing. It begs the question, “When is it okay to start thinking again?” I don’t know about most people’s minds, but I don’t “stop thinking.” My mind just doesn’t work that way. And why would I want it to anyway? So, homeopathy only makes sense only if you suspend any part of your brain that determines sense?

What became the last straw for me was a student’s response to something the teacher said:

“Yeah, that makes sense, because I can put a thought into a crystal and give that to someone, and that will heal them.”

Though I may be in the majority of people in the general population in thinking this is utterly ludicrous, I was in a definite minority in this room. I simply couldn’t take the barrage anymore. During a break, I went up to talk to the lead instructor. He could see that I was not comfortable here and was having a hard time. He laid it out for me that he “could never prove that homeopathy was effective by my standards,” He also said that it “didn’t bother him if it wasn’t real” and that even if it was just by a placebo effect, he was “still helping.”

There is definitely something to be said for the placebo effect, but I realized I have ethical issues with being in a profession that considers no real treatment just as worthy of charging for. And, I have a problem with a \$20,000 tuition bill and spending four years of my time learning something that may not even be true.

In the end, I spent 5 full days at the homeopathy academy. It was one of the most marginalizing, confusing, degrading, and surreal experiences of my life. A few months after this experience, I began allopathic pre-med studies and haven’t looked back.

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