

Is homeopathy bunk?

>> 'Evidence from research in humans does not show that homeopathy is effective for treating the range of health conditions considered'

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PRACTITIONER of homeopathy Dr Lance Giles has brushed aside the latest scientific report on homeopathy as "another attempt to discredit the profession".

This is in response to a draft report presented by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) which has assessed the effectiveness of homeopathy.

"The evidence from research in humans does not show that homeopathy is effective for treating the range of health conditions considered," concluded the report.

While most peer-reviewed clinical research conducted on homeopathy have shown positive results, the Australian report claims that results from most of these studies are "unreliable" and show homeopathy to be no better than a placebo.

The placebo effect is a psychosomatic phenomenon that appears to alleviate or sometimes completely eliminate symptoms based on the patient's expectation that the treatment will work even if it (unknown to the patient) chemically or pharmacologically does not.

Why is homeopathy so popular?

Giles, who has practices in Richards Bay and Empangeni, attributed the popularity of homeopathy during the 19th century to the death rates in normal (allopathic) hospitals which, when compared to homeopathic hospitals, were significantly higher. This can be attributed to the dangerous and ineffective medical procedures such as bloodletting and others practiced at allopathic hospitals at the time.

The medical profession is very different now and has become much safer and more effective being evidence based. There are still many studies on homeopathy aimed at adding to the little data available.

What's the big deal?

One issue raised by sceptics and some scientists against homeopathy is the medicine prescribed by homeopaths. The active ingredients used are diluted to the point that not a single molecule of the active ingredient can be detected in the solution and a certain "signature" of the agent is left in the water's "memory".

No reliable scientific principle supports this process and if it is true, it challenges basic laws of physics, chemistry and pharmacology.

Giles explained the "law of similars",



which he says is an underlying philosophy of homeopathy. He attributes the negative results of double-blind studies on some homeopathic studies as a failure to incor-

Doctor Lance Giles treats his patients in totality.

PHOTO: SIBUSISO BIYELA

porate this philosophy.

"We don't just treat the disease, we treat the person in totality," said Giles, explaining why he has happy patients.

To explain away the claim by the Australian study that "homeopathic medicine performs no better than a placebo" Giles cited cases where homeopathic veterinarians were successful in treating animals, and how he often treats children.

"The placebo effect cannot possibly be present in babies and animals," said Giles. **Is homeopathy a science?**

"Yes it is," said Giles. But he agreed that peer-reviewed papers by homeopaths are not included in mainstream medical journals and that homeopathic medicines are not put through rigorous scientific research. Rather that the "law of similars" is applied to qualify an active ingredient.

"If for example, we find a plant in nature that secretes a yellow liquid that has the properties of bile, we can use it to treat liver disorders for example," said Giles.

If the finished report comes to the

same conclusion, then sceptics will have more ammunition against homeopathy as a pseudoscience. But judging by its legacy spanning over 200 years and facing countless scathing scientific analysis such as the Australian study, it is unlikely that proponents of the practice will change their mind or stop consulting homeopaths.

To be or not to be

If the report is correct, in the case of homeopathy, belief overrides scientific evidence and this is often not explicitly mentioned by many homeopaths.

Giles, however, does admit to the limitations of homeopathy: "If you come to me with a serious disease, I must realise when to refer you to someone else. I must understand my scope of expertise. The problem comes with homeopaths who don't realise this and put the rest of us in a bad light."

The verdict is still out as the study's authors have invited homeopaths from all over the world who feel the study is incomplete or incorrect to submit research papers that contradict the study's conclusion.

Do you use homeopathic medicine or are you completely against it? Visit our website and Facebook pages and have your say.

Is naturopathy a science?

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ACCORDING to the South African Naturopathy Association's website (naturopathy.org.za), naturopathy is "a distinct, integrated system of primary health care, based on the vitalistic principles of naturopathic philosophy and holism. Vitalism treats disease through the support and stimulation of the body's own inherent healing capacity".

Richards Bay resident and doctor of naturopathic medicine, Faryal Luhar agrees. "It is preventive medicine that emphasises optimal health through natural therapies and medicines that are gentle, non-invasive, and evidence-based," says Luhar.

The practice has been criticised for its use of methods which are not evidence-based and do not adhere to the scientific method, which has been the basis of modern science and medicine. This is the reason it is considered by many in the science community as a pseudoscience.

Having practiced for 10 years, she is well aware of the scathing scepticism surrounding her practice and has made it her mission to educate people about the true nature of naturopathy.

"I am used to sceptics and those who resist the growing popularity of my medicine for various reasons. I tend to allow people to find out for themselves why naturopathic medicine works," she said.

According to QuackWatch, an organisation specialising in the exposure of quack medical practice defines naturopathy as a "pseudoscience", which means that claims made by the field's practitioners are not proven by scientific methods and at times are at loggerheads with well-established medical principles.

"A close look will show that naturopathy's philosophy is simplistic and that its practices are riddled with quackery," says Stephen Barrett (MD) the author of the article on the organisation's website.

However, she explained what naturopaths do,

saying: "Naturopathic doctors diagnose, treat and remove obstacles to health using nutrition and supplementation, botanical medicines, homeopathy, Chinese medicine and acupuncture, hydrotherapy, counseling, physical medicine and in some cases intravenous therapies."

She further contrasted allopathic (modern) medicine and naturopathy, "naturopathic medicine focuses on the root or underlying cause of disease and does not merely treat symptoms - which is the basis of allopathic medicine. It takes into account the person's physical, emotional, mental, psychological, environmental and spiritual aspects when treating an individual. "There is mounting evidence speaking to its effectiveness, benefits and safety record," she said. There are no scientific peer-reviewed papers

that have been published in reputable science and mainstream medical journals.

Instead, there are a few research institutes such as the Naturopathic Physicians Research Institute (NPRI), which comprises solely of naturopaths. And there are specialist "journals of natural medicine".

"While conventional medicine using pharmaceuticals and surgery has its place in medicine, the adverse effects and morbidities associated with mainstream medicine is a reason for the shift in society towards the use of natural solutions," she said.

Doctor of naturopathy Faryal Luhar allows people to find out for themselves why naturopathic medicine works.

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