

Faith-based degree ‘damages science’ (Mark Henderson, Science Editor)

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British universities are dishonest and undermining science by offering bachelor of science (BSc) degrees in homoeopathy, a leading medical researcher said yesterday. David Colquhoun, Professor of Pharmacology at University College London (UCL), said that the courses were fundamentally dishonest because homoeopathic medicine was not founded on science, yet was being presented as such by reputable universities.

BSc degrees, he said, should be reserved for subjects which had genuine scientific content, and ought not to be awarded for the study of a system of medicine that had repeatedly failed rigorous clinical trials.

In a commentary for the journal Nature, he wrote that while courses in subjects such as golf course management and surf studies had been widely derided as “Mickey Mouse” degrees, they at least did not pretend to be something they are not.

The homoeopathy BScs offered by Westminster, Salford and Central Lancashire universities were far worse because the underlying subject matter was founded on faith, not science.

“What matters here is that degrees in things such as golf course management are honest,” Professor Colquhoun said. “They do what it says on the label. That is different from awarding BSc degrees in subjects that are not science at all, but are positively antiscience. They are plain dishonest.”

The courses, he said, were profoundly damaging to the reputations of the former polytechnics offering them. He criticised the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, which oversees degree standards, and Universities UK, representing vice-chancellors, for failing to tackle the issue.

Universities UK said that it had considered the matter, and ruled that it was up to individual institutions to decide how to describe particular courses.

When contacted by Nature for an explanation of why they felt it justified to confer BSc degrees in homoeopathy, the universities of Salford, Westminster and Central Lancashire all declined to respond. Only Westminster agreed to provide Professor Colquhoun with details of what is taught in the disputed course. Homoeopathy is a system of medicine developed by Samuel Hahnemann in the early 19th century, which rests on the idea that physical conditions can be treated using substances that would normally provoke similar symptoms.

These substances are then diluted so many times that not a single molecule remains in the final remedy, and homoeopaths claim that this process actually increases their therapeutic potential.

There is no good evidence that homoeopathic treatments are any more effective than a placebo for any illness, and their use is widely derided by scientists. Critics argue that such therapies cannot be effective, as the formulations given to patients do not contain active ingredients and that any benefit derives from consultations with a sympathetic practitioner, sensible nutritional advice, and the placebo effect.

Five homoeopathic hospitals are partially supported by the NHS, and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency recently changed its rules to allow manufacturers to claim health benefits for homoeopathic remedies without submitting supportive data.

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