

Homoeopathy: voodoo on the NHS (JAMIE WHYTE)

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HOMOEOPATHS ARE prescribing their potions for malaria prevention, it was reported in *The Times* yesterday. This is worrying, even to Melanie Oxley of the Society of Homeopaths, because, as she says, there is no evidence that homoeopathy can guard against malaria. Of course, malaria is not a special case. There is no evidence that homoeopathy can guard against or cure anything at all. A review of clinical trials of homoeopathy published in *The Lancet* in 2005 concluded that homoeopathy has no more than a placebo effect on patients.

This is not surprising. Homoeopathy is based on two main hypotheses. The first is the “Law of Similars”: the idea that illnesses are cured by small doses of substances that cause their symptoms. Since arsenic causes shortness of breath, for example, small doses of it will cure diseases that also cause shortness of breath, such as asthma.

The second idea is that the smaller the dose, the stronger the cure. A homeopathic potion is created by repeated dilution of the active ingredient in water. The dilution is repeated so often that a drop of the potion will be lucky to contain a single molecule of the active ingredient. When homoeopathic pills have been infused with nothing but water, how could anyone expect them to prevent malaria or cure asthma? Despite the impotence of homoeopathy, Ms Oxley and the NHS Direct website still conclude that it should be used alongside conventional medicine. Homeopathy should be a complementary, not an alternative therapy.

This is a peculiar conclusion. After all, many procedures will do nothing to protect you against malaria, such as jumping up and down on one leg or reciting three times “Mother Earth, protect me”. Yet no one ever recommends these as complements for conventional medicine.

The sensible reaction to the fact that homoeopathy does not work is simply not to use it. This was the suggestion of Professor Michael Baum and the other doctors who signed his open letter in *The Times* in May suggesting that the NHS should stop providing homoeopathy. They complained that money wasted on homoeopathy could be spent on therapies that actually work. And that is true. But this understates the case against homoeopathy on the NHS. Bogus treatments are not merely wasteful, they are dangerous. Several of those who have taken homoeopathic prophylactics have contracted malaria.

It is outrageous that the NHS should knowingly promote this quackery. And it is knowing. The NHS Direct website points out that homoeopathy is contrary to everything we know about chemistry and medicine, and that there is no experimental evidence to support its preposterous claims. Yet the NHS still promotes it, because “despite the lack of clinical evidence, homoeopathy remains one of the most popular complementary therapies in the UK”.

Popularity is no excuse. Many medical treatments are “confidence goods”; their

quality cannot be judged by lay people. Consumers need reassurance that confidence goods are fit for purpose, such as certification by a professional body. We visit doctors and NHS hospitals, in part, to receive this kind of reassurance about the remedies provided.

Most people will quite reasonably take the fact that the NHS offers homoeopathy as certification that it works. Since the NHS knows that homoeopathy does not work, it is intentionally misleading the public.

The popularity of homoeopathy only aggravates the crime. The Times, July 15, 2006