

Taking the sugar pill

"WHEN YOUR BABY dies, don't sue me" warned the angry obstetrician when my wife (as she then wasn't) refused his advice to stay in hospital because her as yet unborn son was stubbornly in the breech position. The obstetrician said there was no hope of turning him and he insisted she should have a Caesarean. She on the other hand really wanted to have a home birth; the problem was solved when her midwife administered a homeopathic remedy. Within hours the baby turned and was born naturally. Last year that baby achieved first class honours at Oxford Brookes University.

Homeopathy, according to the recent resolution by the British Medical Association and the opinions of countless science correspondents, bloggers of the world and self appointed quack watchers, does not work and cannot work because, so these experts say, homeopathic pills are so diluted that you would need a dose the size of Saturn to get one active molecule inside you.

So when my wife (as she now is) decided to train as a homeopath my first reaction was: Surely there are better ways to spend the money? "Yes," she replied, "on the face of it, it makes no sense at all but I have seen it work so many times that I am convinced that homeopathic remedies work." And she went on to add that she knew all about the effects of placebos and that there was something about homeopathy that was far more effective than placebo.

Prosser logic

So far she has treated only a handful of patients but there have been amazing transformations in people who had struggled with their condition for years. Many were very sceptical but willing to give it a try, having exhausted the treatments the NHS could offer.

Two years ago I started developing strange migraine like symptoms. My vision became like a badly adjusted television with flashing lights and jagged shapes. It was colourful but disturbing. She gave me a single remedy and the problem disappeared as did a gnawing toothache several months later when I was treated by a reme-

dy derived from a volcano (Hekla lava).

The response will always be "well you would have got better anyway", but when so many people appear to benefit from this type of treatment it might be instructive to look on the question of the efficacy of homeopathic remedies from a legal point of view. And here let me draw in none other than Lord Prosser. He said (in *Dingley v Chief Constable of Strathclyde Police* [1998]): "Countless conclusions as to causal relationship are reached precisely upon a form of post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning: if B is observed never to occur except shortly after A, the conclusion may be relatively easy – but if B is observed to occur frequently after A, then even if each sometimes occurs without the other, the frequency with which B occurs after A may nonetheless justify a more or less firm conclusion that A, in certain circumstances, causes B. I do not regard such conclusions as based on false (or indeed simple) logic."

He was not of course deciding on homeopathic remedies, but he was considering issues of causation.

Mountain out of a molecule

So how does it work? This is where the BMA (and others) think they can score points. Homeopathy undoubtedly appears weird – especially the homeopathic principle that the more diluted the dose the stronger the remedy becomes.

It should be remembered that homeopathy is not just a matter of dishing out pills. The key seems to be in the time spent analysing the individual and coming to the indicated treatment for that person. Homeopaths, who at £75 an hour incidentally make even legal aid solicitors appear rich, take a huge amount of time to find out about their patients as opposed to the seven minutes or so that are allocated to the average GP appointment.

I have now met numerous homeopaths who have given me dramatic and

YOU OFTEN GET WORSE BEFORE YOU GET BETTER



convincing accounts of the way homeopathy works.

One of those encounters (bizarrely as I was waiting to collect my luggage at an airport) led to me being invited onto the Board of the Society of Homeopaths as a legal advisor. "You are married to a homeopath, so you must be sympathetic to homeopathy" he said as he struggled for his suitcase. I was, and I now have an extra line to add to my CV, but this article expresses my views only - untainted by the smallest molecule of influence from the society.

Of course it does not cure everything and homeopathy should not be regarded as a replacement for conventional medicine but I am convinced that it works for a lot of people a lot of the time. And the great thing is: it is safe, which sadly is more than can be confidently claimed of conventional medicine.

No deaths have been attributed to a homeopathic remedy. So rather than knocking it, perhaps the NHS should be encouraged to spend more on homeopathy because if, for whatever reason, people are cured or helped by low cost and safe remedies why spend billions on expensive ones that can often cause harm?

Yes I know I have not answered the question about how it works and I will not even try. The answer may be the same as that given to the question: why does it take three women with PMT to change a light bulb? Answer: BECAUSE IT DOES.

And now I am going to run and hide, not from the anti homeopathy lobby but from enraged women who resent this sexist joke.

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