



Keep taking the arsenic (Filed: 25/11/2005)

Results of a six-year study have proved a boost for homoeopathic remedies. Elizabeth Grice reports

As benign-looking as any poisoner in a crime thriller, Dr David Spence is administering arsenic to two unsuspecting females.

He is a silvery-haired gentleman with a soft, listening manner and eyes as bright as quartz. They love his attentiveness, and, though they don't have any idea what is in the little packets of white powder that he prescribes for them every few months, they love his medicine even more.

Angela Evans and Deborah Williams both suffer from complaints that years of conventional medicine failed to ameliorate or cure. As a last resort, they were referred by their frustrated GPs to the twinkling Dr Spence, a homoeopath working within the NHS.

"We get everyone else's failures," he says mischievously. "I deal with patients who have been thrown on the medical scrap heap. You could say that's not a very promising case load."

Evans, 54, had been prostrated by severe migraines two or three times a week since the age of 16. For hours, she would have to lie in a darkened room. Her social life drained away because it was impossible to know with any certainty whether she would be able to go out.

"My life was on hold," she says. "I'd reached the point of desperation." Williams, 35, had endured such an extreme form of pre-menstrual tension (PMT) that for two weeks of every month, she was so irrational, so depressed and so full of rage that it was becoming a strain on her marriage.

As it happens, the homoeopathic remedy for both was varying doses of the well-known poison, arsenicum album, or white arsenic.

"It is a big medicine," says Spence, with satisfaction. "It has a very well-documented toxicology. It affects most systems of the body." Homoeopathic physicians have been prescribing it for more than two centuries in Europe and America - for a whole raft of problems, from asthma to anxiety - apparently without a single case of poisoning.

Neither Evans nor Williams knew what was in their remedy, and they were so grateful to be better that they didn't bother to ask.

In the search for a cure for her migraines, Evans had had a brain scan and taken every form of conventional medicine. Many had unpleasant side-effects; none, the desired effect. "You reach the point, to be honest, where you'll have a go at anything because you are so desperate," she says.

Since taking homoeopathic remedies, she has resumed a normal life - having only one migraine attack in the last six months. "And I am a calmer person generally for whatever it is I've been taking."

Williams, too, is a changed person. Her rages and depressions have vanished, she can do her job as a flight attendant without biting the heads off colleagues and her long-suffering husband, Dean, who tended to get the brunt of her irrational outbursts, says: "It is like the sunshine after the storm. A really dark cloud has lifted."

Both women were part of a six-year study at Bristol Homeopathic Hospital, where Spence - once as sceptical about the value of homoeopathy as many mainstream doctors - is clinical director and consultant physician.

The results have been a colossal boost, not just to homoeopathy as a therapeutic system, but to Spence personally, because he is nearing retirement. They show that more than 70 per cent of his 6,500 patients with chronic diseases reported an improvement in their health after treatment.

With children, the results were even better - 89 per cent of under 16s with asthma improved, as did 68 per cent of young eczema patients. "As you would expect, children have much cleaner and more responsive systems," he explains. "They are capable of quicker recovery and repair."

The other reason the survey is causing him such delight is that it contradicts a scathing report published in The Lancet recently by Professor Matthias Egger, among others. The Anglo-Swiss review of 110 trials dismissed homoeopathy as no better than taking dummy drugs and concluded that "specific effects of homoeopathic remedies seem implausible".



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CHRISTOPHER JONES

This has led to a medical ding-dong in the long-running [debate about the value of homoeopathy](#), with Egger (known in the profession as Eggy) accusing Spence and his colleagues of failing to use a "control group" for comparison and Spence retorting that his huge observational study - the largest of its kind ever published - involving 23,000 consultations with no exclusions and no bias, is a pure measure of achievement. "It's what I call 'real world' analysis," he told me. "It's what happens."

Spence berates Egger and his colleagues for "rehashing old statistics" and producing a data-deficient report, while Egger rather insultingly suggests that homoeopathic patients, asked by their friendly practitioner if they feel better, "will come up with the answer the doctor wants to hear". The placebo effect, he argues, accounts for most clinical improvement.

Try telling this to Angela Evans or Deborah Williams, whose homoeopathic relief from their worsening illnesses has been so real, and so lasting, as to be life-changing.

Joan Dainton, 76, another of Spence's grateful patients, has had her chronic psoriasis eased by his prescription for potassium salts after all conventional medication failed.

"There isn't a cure," she says, "but it is wonderful to be so much better. It flares up if I get upset or stressed, but I just come back for a new powder. It gives you hope when you come to a place like this after not getting anywhere for so long."

In homoeopathy, illnesses are treated using highly diluted forms of herbs and minerals, known as microdoses, that in higher quantities could provoke the very symptoms that are being addressed.

The therapy is based on the principle of "like cures like", an idea first expounded by Hippocrates, the so-called father of medicine in 450 BC, but not rationalised into a clinical system until the late 18th century, by the German physician, Samuel Hahnemann.

A homoeopath assesses the whole person - a patient's medical history, symptoms and even personality traits - and then creates custom-made tinctures, pills or powders from hundreds of wondrously-named plants such as bryony, calendula, feverfew, flaxseed, gentian root and ginkgo biloba.

Last year, there were 44,887 new or follow-up appointments at Britain's five homoeopathic hospitals, in Bristol, London, Glasgow, Tunbridge Wells and Liverpool.

And sales of over-the-counter homoeopathic remedies reached a record £32 million last year.

Though he feels his discipline is vindicated by his new report, Spence makes no extravagant claims. Homoeopathy is neither a panacea for all conditions, he says, nor appropriate for all illnesses - 30 per cent of his patients get no benefit at all. It has an excellent track record for eczema, asthma, bowel problems, hormone imbalance, arthritis, depression and in cancer therapy, for instance, but is no good for thyroid disorders or diabetes, and hypertension is best treated conventionally.

"My patients don't always like it when I refer them to a GP," he says. "They say, 'You, of all people.' But there are things that must be treated by ordinary medicine."

"I am only a simple physician. I am here to help patients get better. There is still a body of resistance within the medical profession to homoeopathy because the exact mechanism of action of homoeopathic medicines is not yet fully understood. But people can make of it what they like. At the end of the day, if the patient is better that is all that counts."

- To find your nearest qualified homoeopath: www.truhomeopathy.org or tel 0870 444 3950.

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