We answer the critics

Homeopathy has been under attack from a small number of scientists and science journalists, who have framed their arguments in a simplistic and populist way that has grabbed the attention of the media. Unfortunately this has resulted in a polarisation of the subject. Here, we pick out the main criticisms that have been levelled at homeopathy and answer them frankly and factually.

They say: There is no clinical evidence for the effectiveness of homeopathy

We say: There is evidence - take another look

- A good body of clinical evidence exists. 138 randomised controlled trials (RCTs) have been published to the end of 2008: 60 positive, 10 negative and 68 not statistically conclusive.
- Five out of six meta-analyses (or systematic reviews - seen as the 'gold standard' for assessing the efficacy of a treatment in conventional medicine) of homeopathy RCTs published since 1991 show homeopathy to have a greater effect than placebo.
- Statistically non-conclusive trials do not equate to negative trials and point to the need for more research into homeopathy, which deserves adequate funding arrangements.
- RCTs have demonstrated a positive effect for homeopathy in treating a number of conditions including allergies, respiratory infections, childhood diarrhoea, influenza, rheumatic diseases, vertigo, fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, sinusitis, acute ear infection, bronchitis, and chronic fatigue and pre-menstrual syndromes.
- Clinical observational studies consistently show that over 70% of patients report benefit from homeopathic treatment. Many had tried conventional treatment first without success.

See:

- Spence DS, Thompson EA, Barron SJ. Homeopathic Treatment for Chronic Disease: A 6-Year, University-Hospital Outpatient Observational Study. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 2005; **11** (5): 793-798
- Thompson EA, Mathie RT, Baitson ES, et al. Towards standard setting for patient-reported outcomes in the NHS homeopathic hospitals. *Homeopathy* 2008; **97** (3): 114-121 http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.homp.2008.06.005
- For a detailed appraisal of the research evidence go to http://www.facultyofhomeopathy.org/research/

They say: We now know homeopathy is no more than placebo

We say: No we don't! One flawed study does not have the last word

- The study published by *The Lancet* in August 2005, which claimed to find homeopathy was no more than placebo, was deeply flawed and has been critiqued by senior researchers in this country and abroad.

- Its conclusions were based on only 8 trials selected from a list of 110. If the trials included in a final 8 had been different, the conclusion would have come out in favour of homeopathy. *The Lancet*'s press release gave the impression that the conclusions were based on all 110 trials.

- The study fails to meet the generally accepted standards for meta-analyses, known as the 'QUOROM' statement (Quality of Reports of Meta-analyses of Randomised Controlled Trials), which was itself published in *The Lancet* in 1999.

- A re-analysis of the Shang data (Oct 2008) has revealed that the conclusions were skewed by one large trial that was not positive for homeopathy. With this trial removed from the analysis, homeopathy was shown to have an effect above placebo.

See:

- Lüdtke R, Rutten ALB. The conclusions on the effectiveness of homeopathy highly depend on the set of analyzed trials. *J Clin Epidemiol*, Oct 2008. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2008.06.015

- Rutten ALB, Stolper CF. The 2005 meta-analysis of homeopathy: the importance of post-publication data. *Homeopathy*, Oct 2008. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.homp.2008.09.008

Dr Peter Fisher, Clinical Director of the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, has written a detailed commentary on these two studies. Go to http://www.jclinepi.com/article/S0895-4356(08)00190-X/pdf

They say: Homeopathy is totally implausible with no basis in real science

We say: Whilst the idea seems implausible, there appears to be a basis in science

- The leading current proposal for the mode of action of very high dilutions is that water is capable of storing information relating to substances with which it has previously been in contact. There is an increasing amount of laboratory research that is extending our understanding of how such dilutions work and scientists have admitted surprise at their own findings.

- Recently, new hypotheses have been proposed that explain how homeopathic dilutions may work.

- Laboratory studies on tissues from animals and plants have shown that homeopathic medicines can have biological effects.

See:

- Belon P, Cumps J, Ennis M, et al. Histamine dilutions modulate basophil activation. *Inflammation Research* 2004; **53**: 181-8

- Rey L Thermoluminescence of ultra-high dilutions of lithium chloride and sodium chloride. *Physica (A)* 2003; **323**: 67-74

- *Homeopathy* 2007; **96** (3): 141-229 (Special Issue: The Memory of Water)

They say: Homeopaths mislead their patients and give them false hope

We say: Our critics appear to believe the public is gullible: they dismiss patient-reported outcome studies as an example of the placebo response

- Homeopaths tend to be consulted by those who have tried conventional medicines and have not been helped by them, but it is misleading to suggest that this group is especially susceptible to placebo.
- Members of the Faculty of Homeopathy do not make false claims: they are regulated by the General Medical Council which forbids this. Instead they encourage their patients to make informed choices, setting out the evidence available.
- It may be true to say that because the treatment is individualised, the patient feels special, but there is compelling evidence from research that homeopathy has an effect above placebo.
- A report published in the BMJ in 2004 classed only 36% of orthodox treatments as beneficial or likely to be beneficial (see p5). Does it then follow that orthodox doctors lie to their patients about 64% of their treatments?

Two very good accounts of placebo have been published, the first by one of homeopathy's strongest critics:

- Goldacre B. *Bad Science* 2008 pp.63-85. Fourth Estate. ISBN 978-0-00-724019-7
- Professor Irving Kirsch, Department of Psychology, University of Hull, speech to the Royal College of Physicians about placebo and the power of belief, September 2007. Go to http://www.fih.org.uk/integrated_health/experts_speak/placebo_and_the.html

They say: Hundreds of millions of pounds are wasted on homeopathy every year – we have seen a figure of £500M quoted!

We say: Homeopathy seems to be cost-effective and could save the NHS money

- The NHS homeopathic hospitals cost approximately £6 million annually
- The available evidence suggests that homeopathy has the potential to generate savings through reduced conventional prescribing and demand for other services.
- A comparative study has suggested that homeopathic management of children with recurrent upper respiratory tract infections was more cost-effective than conventional care.

See:

- Smallwood C. The Role of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the NHS. FreshMinds, October 2005
- Frenkel M, Hermoni D. Effects of homeopathic intervention on medication consumption in atopic and allergic disorders. *Altern Ther Health Med* 2002; **8**: 76-9.
- Witt C, Keil T, Selim D, et al. Outcome and costs of homeopathic and conventional treatment strategies: a comparative cohort study in patients with chronic disorders. *Complement Ther Med* 2005; **13**: 79–86.

They say: Homeopathy has no place in the NHS

We say: Homeopathy plays a vital role in the NHS by filling 'effectiveness gaps' and as a treatment option for patients who cannot take conventional medicines

- Many patients have conditions that are difficult to treat conventionally like osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, eczema and depression. Last year, there were approximately 50,000 appointments at the five homeopathic hospitals – on average, 70% reported that their health improved after treatment.
- Sales of homeopathic medicines continue to increase every year and latest figures show that the market will be worth £46 million by 2012. But we believe that every patient should have the right to homeopathic treatment, whether they can afford it or not.
- Patients want choice in health care and the government has said that giving patients more choice about how, when and where they receive treatment is a cornerstone of its health strategy. Patients should therefore be able to choose homeopathy on the NHS, especially where there is indication that it may help them.

See:

- Complementary Medicines – UK, Mintel, April 2007
- Lord Darzi – High Quality Care for All
  See: www.ournhs.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/dh-darzi-summary-report.pdf

They say: Homeopaths should not treat serious diseases like cancer

We say: In reality cancer patients are treated with conventional medicine; some also choose homeopathy and other interventions; others seek homeopathy to provide relief from side effects of cancer drugs

- Homeopathy is recognised as having value in reducing the severity of side effects from common cancer treatments such as radiotherapy and chemotherapy.
- At Bristol Homeopathic Hospital (BHH) some new referrals come from oncologists referring patients suffering side effects from cancer treatments.

See:

- Balzarini A, Felisi E, Martini A, De Conno F. Efficacy of homeopathic treatment of skin reactions during radiotherapy for breast cancer: a randomized, double-blind clinical trial. *British Homeopathic Journal*, 2000 **89**: 8–12.
- Thompson EA, Montgomery A, Douglas D, Reilly D. A pilot, randomized, double-blinded, placebo-controlled trial of individualized homeopathy for symptoms of estrogen withdrawal in breast-cancer survivors. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 2005 **11**: 13–20.

They say: Homeopathy is alternative, wacky and unregulated

We say: Homeopathy is a complementary medicine that is integrated alongside conventional treatments by medically qualified specialists

- Medically trained homeopathy specialists know when conventional medicine is most appropriate for their patients. They also have the benefit of being able to prescribe homeopathy when conventional medicine doesn't seem to be helping, often in chronic health conditions.
- There are a number of GPs working in primary care who are specialists in homeopathy, integrating their skills into everyday practice. The integrated approach gives patients the best of both worlds, without compromising standards of care.
- NHS homeopathic doctors are medically trained as well as being members of the Faculty of Homeopathy. They are statutorily registered with the General Medical Council (GMC). They are bound to act within the competence of their profession and their level of training and qualifications in homeopathy.
- Faculty-accredited training is available to doctors, nurses, vets, dentists, midwives, pharmacists, podiatrists, osteopaths and chiropractors. The Faculty has over 1400 members worldwide.

See:

- Sharples F et al. NHS patients' perspective on complementary medicine. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine,* 2003 **11**: 141–47.

They say: Conventional medicine is the only medicine that can help patients

We say: Quite the contrary!

- According to the BMJ Evidence Centre, 13% of 2,500 treatments in current use are rated as beneficial, 23% likely to be beneficial, 8% as trade off between benefits and harms, 6% unlikely to be beneficial, 4% likely to be ineffective or harmful, and 46%, the largest proportion, as unknown effectiveness.
- In addition, many drugs are capable of causing side effects, some of which cause illnesses of their own. A study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2004 found that 6.5% of hospital admissions were judged to be related to an adverse drug reaction, or ADR. The estimated cost of such admissions was £466 million.

See:

- BMJ Evidence Centre: http://clinicalevidence.com/ceweb/about/knowledge.jsp
- Pirmohamed M et al. Adverse drug reactions as cause of admission to hospital: prospective analysis of 18,820 patients *British Medical Journal* 2004; **329**: 15-19.