

## Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The government has published its *Response*<sup>1</sup> to the *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy*<sup>2</sup> produced by the Commons Science and Technology Committee. In essence the *Response* is a re-affirmation of the existing position on homeopathy in the NHS, and a rejection of the radical demands made by the CS&TC for homeopathy to be excluded from the NHS and for its medicines to be identified as placebos. At the same time, the government was not unequivocal on these points. In this article we summarise some of the key issues and consider their implications.

### **Regulation of Homeopathic Medicines**

While the government stated that “the MHRA is reviewing product labelling requirements and elements of the guidance to ensure there is greater clarity”,<sup>3</sup> it did not adopt the position that the standards applicable to orthodox drugs should necessarily be applied to homeopathic medicines. Instead the “greater clarity” was to be (our emphasis) “on the position concerning efficacy as accepted *within homeopathic practice*.”

The government also pointed out that the dominant concerns are European law and the protection of patients’ safety, which they summed up as

The regulation of homeopathic products enables the MHRA to protect the public from unsafe products and unwarranted claims to treat serious illness. The requirement for regulation of homeopathic products is laid

### **Role of Homeopathy in the NHS**

The government emphasised two issues in its *Response*. Firstly, it insisted on the importance of patient choice, referring to the GMC’s guidance, *Good Medical Practice*, and to the need to “reach agreement with the patient on the use of any proposed medication, and the management of the condition by exchanging information and clarifying any concerns”.<sup>4</sup> It added that

The Department of Health wholly supports the concept of the informed patient. The informed patient is better placed to be able to make decisions about their care and well-being and better equipped to manage changes in their health status.

... this information should cover the potential benefits of treatment options, as well as risks and possible side effects.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly the government insisted on the autonomy of clinicians and Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) when it comes to prescribing for patients. Specifically, it noted that

Some PCTs, for example, choose to fund homeopathic services on an exceptional basis for certain individuals. It is not appropriate for the Department of Health to remove the right of PCTs to make these decisions on a case-by-case basis.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time it welcomed the recommendation that

the Department of Health circulate NHS West Kent's review of the commissioning of homeopathy to those PCTs with homeopathic hospitals within their areas.<sup>7</sup>

As regards the CS&TC's demand for information about NHS spending on homeopathy, the government pointed out that

**scrutinising individual trusts' finances to the level of detail that would be needed to answer this question fully, or similar questions in**

### **Evidence for Homeopathy**

The government was careful about the question of evidence of the efficacy or effectiveness of homeopathy. On the one hand, it remarked that

Professor Harper, Chief Scientist at the Department, is of the view that the majority of independent scientists consider the evidence for the efficacy of homeopathy to be weak or absent.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, it emphasised that

There remains, as demonstrated by the submissions to the Committee, some controversy, since there are peer-reviewed reports that therefore have the support of some scientists, that suggest there may be limited evidence of efficacy of homeopathy in certain circumstances. Given the depth of feeling on each side of the debate, it is unlikely that this controversy could be resolved by further analysis of literature or research on the efficacy of homeopathy.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of this, it recognised that the National Institute of Health (NICE) "is unlikely to initiate a review on homeopathy in the near future".<sup>10</sup>

A particularly interesting part of the government's *Response* in respect of the evidence for homeopathy is the comment that

we are not aware of any scientific consensus at present on the mechanisms by which placebos have an effect.<sup>11</sup>

This mimics the frequent claims in the CS&TC *Evidence Check* that there is a lack of any explanation for the mechanism of action of homeopathic medicines *other* than the placebo effect. In fact it has been one of H:MC21's key arguments that it is unscientific to explain a process by reference to another process which is itself inexplicable.

## Conclusion

The government has upheld the existing situation as regards homeopathy in the NHS in this *Response*, though it has retained the option to review its stance at a later date, commenting that

We note the Committee's view that allowing for the provision of homeopathy may risk seeming to endorse it, and we will keep the position under review.<sup>12</sup>

It has also emphasised the primacy of informed patient choice in the process of making decisions about homeopathic treatment, and this reflects two important points. On the one hand there is an implicit recognition of the fact that 10% of people use homeopathy in the UK. On the other hand there is an explicit reference to the scale of public support for homeopathy in the comment that

Complementary and alternative medicine, including homeopathy, has a The mass lobby of Parliament two days after the *Evidence Check* was published, was organised by H:MC21 in order to make sure that “the views of three opponents who happened to be MPs on the CS&TC.

H:MC21's view that it was essential to build a campaigning organisation of homeopaths and patients to defend homeopathy would appear to have been vindicated by this *Response*. Furthermore, the government's emphasis on patient choice makes it clear that increasing the demand for homeopathy, and the “very vocal” defence of it, will help to ensure that it is retained in the NHS and elsewhere in the UK until scientists finally come up with an explanation of its mechanism of action. Despite the propaganda against homeopathy, we can make a difference by standing up for what nearly 29,000 people testified, and what we each know to be true: ‘Homeopathy Worked for Me’!

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<sup>1</sup> *Government Response to the Science and Technology Committee report 'Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy'*, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Health by Command of Her Majesty, July 2010, available at <[http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/@ps/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_117811.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/@ps/documents/digitalasset/dh_117811.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), available at <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmsctech/45/45.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> *Response*, para. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Response*, para. 16, quoting from <[http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/good\\_medical\\_practice.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/good_medical_practice.asp)>.

<sup>5</sup> *Response*, paras 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> *Response*, para. 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Response*, para. 26, referring to the *Evidence Check*, para. 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Response*, para. 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Response*, para. 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Response*, para. 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Response*, para. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Response*, para. 47.