

# Interview with Professor Edzard Ernst, Exeter<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Ursula Kraus-Harper RSHom

*H:MC21 wishes to thank the Deutscher Zentralverein homöopathischer Ärzte [German National Association of Homeopathic Physicians] ([www.welt-der-homoeopathie.de](http://www.welt-der-homoeopathie.de)) for giving permission to publish this interview and the accompanying remarks.*

Professor Ernst is seen as one of the most renowned researchers in the field of complementary medicine in Europe. German newspapers and magazines like *Handelsblatt* and *Stern* like to quote him. The reason may be that he has clear views and does not hesitate to express them boldly: “I hold the only chair for research into complementary medicine in the world and examine homeopathy according to scientific criteria. Up to now, unfortunately, I have found hardly any indication that homeopathy is more than placebo” (*Welt am Sonntag*, April 2005) This sentence appears in almost every Ernst interview. During recent years he has mainly made a name for himself as an author (*Gesund ohne Pillen*, Hanser Verlag, 2009 [Published in English as *Trick or Treatment?*]) or as an expert of popular science books (*Die andere Medizin* [The other medicines], Stiftung Warentest, 2005). But his statements were also essential for the recently published report of the British parliamentary sub-committee on Science and Technology. This report demands that homeopathic treatments should not be available on the National Health Service (NHS) and that homeopathic remedies should not be licensed as medicines. In the media the impression is often given that Edzard Ernst is the voice of complementary medicine research.

The Edzard Ernst myth is also fuelled by the idea that he is a homeopathic physician who turned a critic of homeopathy. In *Trick or Treatment?*, for which Ernst as an author shares responsibility, co-author Singh writes: “One of us, Edzard Ernst, is an insider who practised medicine for many years, including some alternative therapies”. This image is used time and again. In an interview with *Welt am Sonntag* (10 April 2005) Ernst said “...as a physician and trained homeopath, in the past I have treated homeopathically at times, with varying success”. And in an interview with *Technology Review* (23 July 2008) he said: “As a clinician I used to be very impressed by homeopathy”.

The Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung der Paramedizin (GWUP) [Society for the Scientific Research of Para-medicine] and the authors of Science Blog have condensed this into: “..Professor Ernst has himself studied homeopathy and other methods for a long time before he was appointed to the first chair of complementary medicine and submitted these methods to the merciless methods of medicine.”

This transformation makes Ernst interesting for the media. Someone who was a convinced insider and has changed his perspective must be credible. It made us curious. Examples of physicians with experience in homeopathy who turned away from it in disappointment are rare. We therefore interviewed Professor Edzard Ernst; that he agreed to it commands respect.

## Interview

*Question:* Homeopathic treatment is based on different rules from conventional treatment. It does not aim for a clearly defined effect of a drug but a treatment effect. Do you see a difference in this? Do you find that this leads to different research and study concepts?

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<sup>1</sup> From *Homöopathische Nachrichten* [Homeopathic News], April 2010, pp. 1-3, available at [http://www.dzvhae.com/portal/pics/abschnitte/300410102802\\_hn168april10.pdf?PHPSESSID=273eb20b3c19d743c6c106bbd56fd1dc](http://www.dzvhae.com/portal/pics/abschnitte/300410102802_hn168april10.pdf?PHPSESSID=273eb20b3c19d743c6c106bbd56fd1dc)

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*Ernst:* In clinical studies one does not usually test a “clearly defined effect of a drug” but the clinical treatment effect. This does not necessarily result in a different research and study concept.

*Question:* What do you think of the research concept of Heiner Frei for the treatment of ADHD?

Translator’s note: Dr Heiner Frei is a Swiss homeopath; the study can be downloaded at  
<[http://www.heinerfrei.ch/downloads/Downloads%20Publikationen/Improvements\\_engl.pdf](http://www.heinerfrei.ch/downloads/Downloads%20Publikationen/Improvements_engl.pdf)>

*Ernst:* An interesting approach. An independent review of the results would be desirable.

*Question:* What is your view on the double-blinded trial by Möllinger et al. comparing different remedies, with a specific result? Are there reasons why this resulted in a significant difference as compared to placebo controls?

*Ernst:* Homeopathic remedy trials are not clinical studies to examine the clinical effectiveness of a remedy on a patient. They are, therefore, meaningless in answering the question of whether homeopathic remedies can help sick people more than placebo.

*Question:* If a method is effective for diarrhoea and not for muscle pain, is that method then not effective anyhow? Does this not question meta-analyses with mixed indicators?

*Ernst:* Meta-analyses with mixed indicators certainly have their limitations. They examine questions of principle rather than specific ones.

*Question:* How do you judge the susceptibility of meta-analyses to the manipulation of inclusion criteria?

*Ernst:* A proper meta-analysis should be based on a protocol that should not be manipulated post-hoc

*Question:* Do you know the work of Kienle in cognition-based medicine? It is an attempt to introduce qualitative methods into evaluation? What is your view on this?

*Ernst:* I cannot see that cognition-based medicine has entered the medical field. I think in complementary medicine we should follow those standards that are generally accepted.

*Question:* Do you see fundamental problems with double-blind studies for individualised methods?

*Ernst:* No.

*Question:* What kind of research do you carry out at your chair?

*Ernst:* We research mainly the effectiveness and safety of complementary methods. We have published around 30 clinical studies and more than 100 systematic reviews (<http://sites.pcmd.ac.uk/compmed/research.html>).

*Question:* Are you fundamentally of the opinion that someone who researches complementary medicine should have trained and practised in at least one of these methods?

*Ernst:* Yes, at least one person of the research team should have the relevant knowledge.

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*Question:* Do you have the additional medical title ‘Homeopathy’?

Translator’s note: To be able to add ‘homeopathy’ to one’s medical title in Germany, one has to have passed an exam at the relevant regional branch of the German Landesärztekammer [medical council]

*Ernst:* I acquired the prerequisites for it, but never applied for the title.

*Question:* So is it correct that you did not acquire the additional medical title ‘Homeopathy’ but took further medical education courses in homeopathy? If yes, which ones?

*Ernst:* I never completed any courses.

*Question:* Did you learn any other method of complementary medicine?

*Ernst:* I learned, among others, homeopathy, phytotherapy, massage, manual medicine, acupuncture and autogenic training.

*Question:* Where were you able to get experience in homeopathy, and to what extent?

*Ernst:* After my state exam I worked under Dr Zimmermann at the Munich Krankenhaus für Naturheilweisen [Hospital for Natural Healing Methods]. After that, during my training as Consultant for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, I had a good look at some methods of complementary medicine. For the last 17 years I have led a team of about 15 researchers with different specialisations.

*Question:* Is it correct that you worked for half a year at the Hospital for Natural Healing Methods?

*Ernst:* I am not sure for how long I worked at the Hospital for Natural Healing Methods, it is some time ago!

## Comments by Curt Kösters, Chair of DZVhÄ

### Does Ernst have homeopathic training?

Contrary to his repeated statements, Edzard Ernst is not a qualified homeopath, and has also not acquired the prerequisites for the additional medical title of ‘Homeopathy’. In the interview with DZVhÄ it becomes clear that he did not take any further education courses in homeopathy and therefore did not fulfil the requirements to acquire the additional medical title of ‘Homeopathy’. And his medical practice in the area of complementary medicine? After his state exam Ernst worked for just half a year as an intern at the Munich Hospital for Natural Healing Methods. “...after that I changed to the laboratory and became a researcher, and that clearly changed my view”, he told *Stern* in March 2009. Ernst has rarely said so clearly that he only has marginal therapeutic experience. During the DZVhÄ interview he could not remember the duration of his medical activity. We can only take a guess about his training in “phytotherapy, massage, manual medicine, acupuncture, and autogenic training”.

### What about his research competence?

We were baffled about the initial reply we received from Professor Ernst when we asked for an interview: “I just read the questions. If you want answers to such specific questions, please name the publications they are referring to”. The leading researcher is obviously not familiar with essential work that has been published during recent years in his own field of work. We gave him the sources willingly, among them a journal of which nobody other than Professor Edzard Ernst himself is a member of the scientific advisory committee.

His answers to the admittedly complex questions were somewhat succinct. It is certainly correct that a homeopathic remedy trial cannot answer questions about clinical effectiveness. But such a study can very well confirm if the effect of a homeopathic remedy is different from the effect of a placebo. His answer to the question about meta-analyses, implying criticism of the well-known Shang et al. publication, was rather weak, too.

Professor Ernst’s career as a scientist is closely related to his position as the Chair for research in complementary medicine at the university of Exeter, which he has held since 1993. The chair was made possible by a £1.5 million donation from an industrialist. The institute is to close in spring 2011 when the financial support of the university ends. His performance as a leading researcher in complementary medicine can probably be seen in this context.

### Is Edzard Ernst the voice of complementary medicine in Europe?

Many universities have institutes where research into CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) is carried out. Other researchers have more sophisticated opinions. Klaus Linde from the Zentrum für Naturheilkundliche Forschung [Centre for Research in Natural Healing] at the TU [Technical University] of Munich wrote: “The debate among clinical researchers is not whether there is positive evidence from placebo-controlled studies, but whether this evidence is sufficient to demonstrate the effectiveness of homeopathy in view of its low plausibility from a natural science perspective.

In his review of *Gesundheit ohne Pillen* (in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 February 2009) Professor Robert Jütte, head of the Institute for the History of Medicine at the Robert Bosch

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Foundation in Stuttgart brings the critique to a point: “The ignorance [of the authors] about methodological and factual objections that have been expressed by leading researchers in the field of complementary medicine about the selective view of these two “experts” is remarkable. Opposing views are not mentioned. The authors also ignore the detailed Health Technology Assessment report about homeopathy under the Swiss programme of Complementary Medicine Evaluation of the year 2006. This report comes to the conclusion that there is sufficient evidence for pre-clinical effect and clinical effectiveness of homeopathy (evidence degrees I and II), and that in absolute terms, and especially in comparison to conventional therapies, homeopathy presents a cost-effective and safe intervention.