

## Cutting on the Bias

On 29 June 2010 patients and homeopaths protested outside the annual representatives meeting of the British Medical Association (BMA) in Brighton. On the evening before members of the Faculty of Homeopathy, fully qualified NHS doctors who have also trained to use homeopathy, lobbied representatives to oppose seven motions demanding that homeopathy be cut from the NHS.[1] These motions did not arise from a dramatic change in the scientific evidence, but were based on the conclusions of the profoundly flawed House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (CS&TC) *Evidence Check: Homeopathy*, published in February 2010.[2] A detailed analysis of the CS&TC report and its context is available on the Counterfire website in *A Check Without Balance*, and it exposes the links between the attacks on homeopathy and the economic interests of the pharmaceutical companies. In contrast, this article will summarise what the attacks on homeopathy mean in practice.

As regards cost, the suggestion that cutting homeopathy will produce substantial savings is completely inaccurate. The NHS spends no more than £12 million each year in total on homeopathy, including premises and staff.[3] Since NHS homeopathic practice now occupies only a fraction of the buildings homeopaths originally brought to the NHS, there would be no change in premises costs from cutting the therapy. Similarly, the medical staff all have orthodox medical training and would probably be relocated within the NHS. This means that the only real saving would be the cost of the medicines themselves. At an annual cost of £152,000, they represent a mere 0.001% of the current £11 billion annual budget for medicines in the NHS.[4]

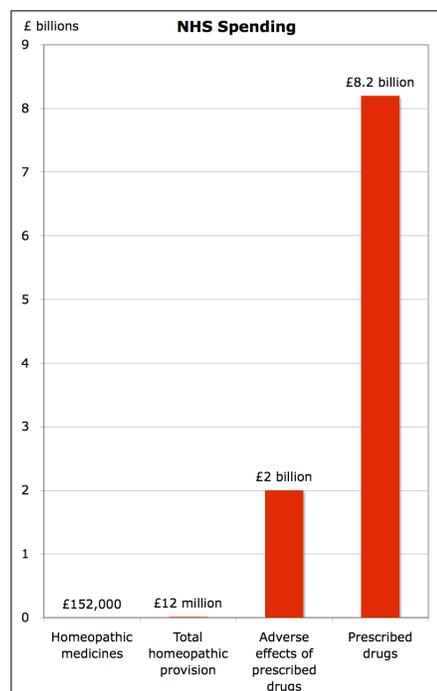


Figure 1: Comparison of NHS spending on homeopathy and pharmaceutical drugs

The absurdity of such high-profile demands for this saving becomes even greater when it is seen in the light of other costs associated with medicines. In 2006 the NHS spent £8.2 billion on drugs and a further £2 billion on treating the adverse effects of those *prescribed drugs*.<sup>[5,6]</sup> In other words, the failure of orthodox drugs in clinical practice led to *additional* costs equivalent to 24% of the budget for medicines. On the basis of these figures, the saving achievable from eliminating adverse drug effects would be over 17,000 times greater than from axing homeopathic medicines (see Figure 1).

Evidence for the effectiveness of homeopathy also needs to be seen in the light of evidence for the effectiveness of orthodox treatments. Only 11% of 2,500 “commonly used treatments” have been proven “beneficial”, and only 23% have been proven “likely to be beneficial”, whilst 51% are of “unknown

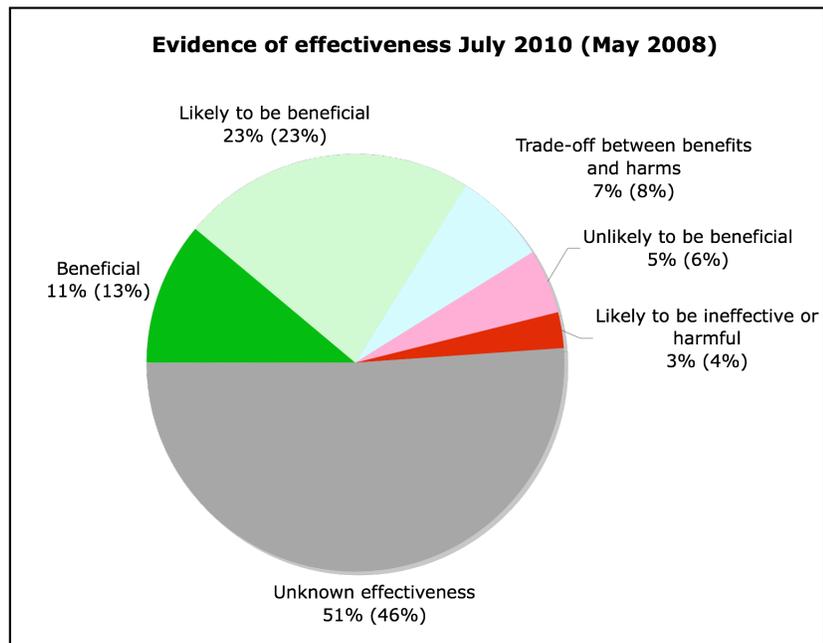


Figure 2: Chart of evidence of effectiveness for 2,500 most commonly used treatments in the NHS, 2010 (with 2008 figures for comparison)

Source: BMJ Clinical Evidence

effectiveness” (see Figure 2).<sup>[7]</sup> The remaining 15% of treatments reflect the problems of side effects and the consequent effects on quality of life, lost working days and early deaths. In fact, referrals for homeopathic treatment within the NHS are so often a last resort in the face of these problems, they have been nicknamed TEETH (tried everything else, try homeopathy). In a study of 6,544 patients at the Bristol Homeopathic Hospital, “All the patients referred to the unit had chronic disease and in many cases this was of several years’ duration”. Even so, 70.7% of them experienced improvement after

homeopathic treatment,[8] and this rate of improvement is seen in other studies in the UK and Europe.[9,10,11,12]

Removing homeopathy from the NHS, therefore, will mean depriving many patients of the only treatment which has helped. This was the case, for example, when Brent teaching Primary Care Trust stopped referring patients to the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital (RLHH):

“We were referred to the RLHH, and homeopathy made a dramatic, positive effect on our health. To not have the treatment is a real crisis for people.”[13]

While some people will be able to resolve this crisis by paying for homeopathic treatment privately, many working people will not have this option. As a result, the doctors’ attack on homeopathy is actually an attack on the right of working people to have access to the treatment which benefits them. Also, many of the patients from Brent have regained access to their treatment through individual appeals, which seriously undermines the argument that the treatment was ineffective.[14]

It is already the case that the overwhelming majority of those using homeopathy pay for their treatment while continuing to pay for the NHS. 10% of people in the UK use homeopathy,[15] including many who work for the NHS, but the NHS homeopathic hospitals only treat some 55,000 patients per year.[16] Furthermore, according to NHS West Kent, before it closed the Tunbridge Wells Homeopathic Hospital in 2009 “Almost all referrals for homeopathy [were] at the request of the patient”.[17] It is clear that there is a significant divergence of opinion about homeopathy between patients and doctors.

In 2007 I helped establish the charity Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (H:MC21) in order to defend homeopathy and the right to receive it on the NHS.[18] H:MC21 has rigorously exposed the propagandist nature of the attacks on homeopathy,[19] and it has united patients and homeopaths, inside and outside the NHS. We do not believe that a monopoly in medicine is beneficial to anyone but shareholders of pharmaceutical companies, and so we urge people to join us, to write to their local MP in protest at the BMA vote, and to “Defend Choice in Medicine”.

*William Alderson is writing in a personal capacity. He is Chair of the charity Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (H:MC21) and an elected member of the Board of Directors of the Society of Homeopaths.*

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- 1 The full text of the motions is available at <<http://www.hmc21.org/#/bma-motions/4542101688>>.
  - 2 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010).
  - 3 Mr O'Brien, response to Q244, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), p. Ev 73.
  - 4 Mr O'Brien, response to Q244, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), p. Ev 73.
  - 5 'Call to curb rising NHS drug bill', 3 April 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7190267.stm>>, accessed 27 November 2008.
  - 6 Sarah Boseley, 'Adverse drug reactions cost NHS £2bn', *The Guardian*, 3 April 2008, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/apr/03/nhs.drugsandalcohol>>, accessed 14 November 2008.
  - 7 'How much do we know?', *BMJ Clinical Evidence* at <<http://clinicalevidence.bmj.com/ceweb/about/knowledge.jsp>>, accessed 7 July 2010 and 18 May 2008.
  - 8 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, 11:793-798, p. 795.
  - 9 Donal McDade, *Evaluation [of a] Complementary and Alternative Medicines Pilot Project* (London: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2008), available at Get Well UK website at <<http://www.getwelluk.com/>>, accessed 27 April 2009; full report at <[http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/final\\_report\\_from\\_smr\\_on\\_the\\_cam\\_pilot\\_project\\_-\\_may\\_2008.pdf](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/final_report_from_smr_on_the_cam_pilot_project_-_may_2008.pdf)>.
  - 10 Dr. Adrian Hunnisett, *Homeopathy Service Survey* (Cirencester: The Park Surgery, 2005).
  - 11 A. Steinsbekk and R. Lütke, 'Patients' assessments of the effectiveness of homeopathic care in Norway: A prospective observational multicentre outcome study', *Homeopathy*, 94 (2005), 10-16, available at: <[http://www.scopus.com/record/display.url?eid=2-s2.0-11844297403&origin=inward&txGid=79ie\\_u0p0cPFoTLkdzTDA2p%3a2](http://www.scopus.com/record/display.url?eid=2-s2.0-11844297403&origin=inward&txGid=79ie_u0p0cPFoTLkdzTDA2p%3a2)>, accessed 14 February 2010.
  - 12 Claudia M. Witt, Rainer Lütke, Nils Mengler, and Stefan N. Willich, 'How healthy are chronically ill patients after eight years of homeopathic treatment? – Results from a long term observational study', *BMC Public Health*, 8 (2008), 413, available at <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2630323/>>.
  - 13 Anna Thorburn quoted by Tom Lawrence in 'Patients Picket for Homeopathy', *Harrow Observer*, 13 June 2007.
  - 14 Personal communication from one of the patients involved in campaigning against these cuts.
  - 15 Professor Woods, response to Q211, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), p. Ev 70.
  - 16 Para. 2.01, 'Memorandum submitted by Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (HO 37)', House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), p. Ev3.
  - 17 Paras 2.21-2.23, 'Memorandum submitted by the NHS West Kent (HO 39)', House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), p. Ev 35.
  - 18 See <<http://www.hmc21.org/>> and <<http://www.homeopathyworkedforme.org/>>.
  - 19 See <<http://www.hmc21.org/#/publications/4535642005>>.