

Briefing Notes about the propaganda campaign against homeopathy - 1

Evidence for homeopathy

- In 2004 a health technology assessment (HTA) was completed for the Swiss government. It concluded that “*the individual CAM interventions, especially homeopathy, were effective, under Swiss conditions safe and, as far as could be judged from the trial situation, also cost-efficient*”. [1] Of the 13 authors, 10 were medically qualified, and six were also qualified in homeopathy. The other three were trained in physics or sociology. Eight of the authors held academic positions. [2] As a result of this report access to homeopathy is now a part of the Swiss constitution.

The attacks on homeopathy

- **Shang et al.:** All the attacks on homeopathy essentially rely on a single study, known as Shang et al. [3] It was published in 2005 in the *Lancet* alongside an editorial claiming this was the end of homeopathy. Researchers very soon pointed out the study did not meet the *Lancet's* own publication standards, especially as its conclusions depended on a very particular (and unexplained) choice of information. [4]
- **Sense About Science:** In 2006 a leaflet attacking homeopathy was published by Sense About Science. [5] Between 2004 and 2009 this charity received 35.7% of its donation funding from the pharmaceutical industry. The author of the leaflet, Chris Tyler, had no qualifications in medicine or homeopathy. The only homeopathy research he cited was Shang et al. [6]
- **Evidence Check:** Chris Tyler then became a parliamentary advisor, and “*pioneered the Science and Technology Committee's 'Evidence Check' programme*”. [7] This committee's report on homeopathy was published in February 2010. [8] It too did not meet normal scientific standards, and relied almost entirely on Shang et al. [9] Out of 14 committee members, only three voted for the report. Of these, only one had attended the hearings, Evan Harris. He had previously received support from Sense About Science, and he subsequently joined its panel of advisors. Another of the three had connections to the pharmaceutical industry. [10]
- **Miscellaneous:** The *Evidence Check* has been used by Primary Care Trusts, the British Medical Association, the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, and other organisations as a basis for attacking homeopathy, especially its use in the NHS.
- **Trick or Treatment:** In 2008 Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst published a book which particularly attacked homeopathy. [11] Neither of them is qualified in homeopathy, though Ernst has alleged that he had practised alternative medicine, despite being unqualified to do so. [12] Simon Singh is a trustee of Sense About Science. [13] Hardly surprisingly, this book misrepresented the facts, disregarded normal scientific standards, and relied heavily on Shang et al. for its case against homeopathy. [14]
- **Ten23:** This organisation gained a lot of media coverage in January 2010 for a “mass overdosing” on homeopathic remedies. Both Simon Singh and Evan Harris took part in this event.
- **Nightingale Collaboration:** The Nightingale Collaboration was seed-funded by Simon Singh. [15] Its first key activity was to promote the use of the ASA against homeopathic websites. The ASA “was surprised when it was deluged by complaints about alternative medicine”. [16]

Conclusion

In short, at the heart of this campaign is a very small group of people, centred about a single organisation, Sense About Science, which has been heavily funded by the pharmaceutical industry.

References

- 1 Gudrun Bornhöft and Peter Matthiessen (eds), *Homeopathy in Healthcare – Effectiveness, Appropriateness, Safety, Costs: An HTA report on homeopathy as part of the Swiss Complementary Medicine Evaluation Programme*, trans. from the German by Margaret M Saar (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer-Verlag, 2011), p. 3.
- 2 Gudrun Bornhöft and Peter Matthiessen (eds), *Homeopathy in Healthcare – Effectiveness, Appropriateness, Safety, Costs: An HTA report on homeopathy as part of the Swiss Complementary Medicine Evaluation Programme*, trans. from the German by Margaret M Saar (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer-Verlag, 2011), pp. 230-234.
- 3 Aijing Shang, Karin Huwiler-Müntener, Linda Nartey, Peter Jüni, Stephan Dörig, Jonathan AC Sterne, Daniel Pewsner and Prof Matthias Egger, 'Are the clinical effects of homeopathy placebo effects? Comparative study of placebo-controlled trials of homeopathy and allopathy', *The Lancet*, 9487 (2005), 726-732, at <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16125589>>.
- 4 Klaus Linde, Wayne B. Jonas, 'Meta-analysis of homeopathy trials' (letter to the editor), *The Lancet*, 9503 (2005), 2081-2082 at <[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(05\)67878-6/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(05)67878-6/fulltext)>.
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Gudrun Bornhöft and Peter Matthiessen (eds), *Homeopathy in Healthcare – Effectiveness, Appropriateness, Safety, Costs: An HTA report on homeopathy as part of the Swiss Complementary Medicine Evaluation Programme*, trans. from the German by Margaret M Saar (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer-Verlag, 2011), pp. 39-44.
- 5 Chris Tyler, *Sense About Homeopathy* (London: Sense About Science, 2006).
- 6 William Alderson, *Nonsense, Not Science*, (Stoke Ferry: Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21st Century, 2011) at <<http://www.hmc21.org/#/nonsense-not-science/4549591274>>. **It is interesting to note that since the publication of this critique, Sense About Science has stopped including information about its donors in its annual accounts, so the current level of its funding by the pharmaceutical industry is unknown.**
- 7 'CSaP Appoints New Executive Director', Centre for Policy and Science, Cambridge University, 15 March 2010 at <<http://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/news/article-csap-appoints-new-executive-director/>>.
- 8 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2010), pp. 48-50 at <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmsstech/45/45.pdf>>.
- 9 Earl Baldwin of Bewdley, 'Observations on the report *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy* by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, February 2010', June 2010.
British Homeopathic Association, 6 responses to the *Evidence Check 2: Homeopathy*, 1-3 March 2010 at <http://www.britishhomeopathic.org/media_centre/>.
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- 10 William Alderson, 'A Check Without Balance', *Counterfire*, 2010 at <<http://www.hmc21.org/#/check-without-balance/4543591988>>.
- 11 Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst, *Trick or Treatment? Alternative medicine on trial* (London: Bantam Press, 2008).
- 12 Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst, *Trick or Treatment? Alternative medicine on trial* (London: Bantam Press, 2008), p. 3.
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- 13 See <<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/>>.
- 14 William Alderson, *Halloween Science* (Stoke Ferry: Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21st Century, 2009) at <<http://www.hmc21.org/#/halloween-science/4535659799>>.
- 15 See <<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/about1.html>>.
- 16 Tim Bradshaw, 'ASA man surfs web of complaints', *Financial Times* online, 2 September 2011 at <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9ca88bcc-d582-11e0-9133-00144feab49a.html#axzz1aa26rZGG>>.