

## Does alternative Health Medicine Have a Place in Modern Dentistry?

Alternative health...alternative to what?

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The canopy enclosing today's alternative therapies is broad indeed. It may include everything from the sublime to the silly, from the serious to the superstitious, from the helpful to the harmful. Many, perhaps most alternative therapies share two characteristics; a lack of scientific inquiry into efficacy and a lack of intellectual curiosity into origins. Before we trade in our science-based medicine for an "alternative", perhaps we should investigate thoroughly. One such alternative therapy, now quite the "in thing", is homeopathy. A brief review of its origins serves as a cautionary tale for any health professional willing to forsake critical thinking.

Two hundred years ago, at the dawn of another new century, a German physician. Samuel Hahnemann, was rightly distressed by the current practices of bloodletting, leeching and purging. The current thinking (non-scientific, of course) was that disease occurred because the body's humors were out of balance. This "theory of opposites" guided much of medicine. If a patient had a high fever, it might indicate too much blood. To rebalance the humor, a patient would be bled. George Washington, not a dumb guy, readily accepted such treatment and helped hasten his own death. Hahnemann decided that since the "law of opposites" wasn't all that great, he would come up with something new, the "law of similia", or similar. Isn't it interesting how certain ideas get the impressive prefix "theory"? There are still people calling themselves doctor that refer to the germ theory of disease as only a theory. That's another essay. Anyway, Hahnemann developed the following:

- 1) most diseases are caused by a suppressed itch (psora)
- 2) life is a spirital force which directs the body's healing
- 3) cures can be discerned by noting similar reactions in healthy people (law of similia)
- 4) remedies become more effective as the dilution is INCREASED (law of infinitesimals) and that this effectiveness is increased by tapping the containers on the hand or on a leather pad or by just shaking. He called this Potentizing.

Following Hahnemann's rules of nonsense, here's how it works. If a patient is suffering from tremors, you prepare a dilute solution of some ingredient that in stronger doses, given to a healthy person, causes these same tremors. Welcome back to 1800.

At about the same time that Hahnemann was doing his best to keep medicine in the dark ages, a few hundred miles south in Italy, a physicist had just unlocked one of the great secrets of the Universe. Amedeo Avogadro (1776-1865) had somehow figured out that a mole of any substance holds  $6.022 \times 10^{23}$  molecules of the substance. I don't know how he did it, but I've never seen an electron either. To be able to hold 18 grams of water and say you knew how many molecules you were holding, was beyond the intellectual grasp of just about everybody. It was so beyond his time that the number wasn't fully accepted until two years after Avogadro's death, forty-five years after its discovery.

Our story continues back in Germany. Possessing no knowledge of Avogadro's number or scientific methodology, but abundantly blessed with a medieval alchemist's imagination, our hero Hahnemann came up with some amazing discoveries. His homeopathic dilutions and applications remain the standard reference used in today's homeopathy. Homeopathic dilutions are usually noted by X or C. X expresses a factor of 10 and C expresses a factor of 100. A 3X dilution is 1 to 1000. A 3C dilution is 1 to 1,000,000. Now the standard homeopathic treatment for flu is a 200C dilution of a substance called oscillococcinum. I have no idea what that is, but it comes from a freshly killed duck liver. I suppose freshly killed duck liver causes flu like symptoms in a healthy patient (pause for laughter). A 200C dilution is a number with 400 zeros. This number has no name, but the estimate for the total number of molecules in the entire universe is a number with only 100 zeros, a googol. Stay with me. A homeopathic dilution of 12C or 24X roughly corresponds to Avogadro's number. To receive one molecule of homeopathic substance in a 30X pill, you would have to swallow 2 billion pills! A marginally educated proponent of homeopathy will acknowledge these facts, but tell you that the solution retains memory. We must be very lucky that the solution retains only the curative memory and not the toxic memory. Homeopathic substances may include raw bovine testicles, belladonna, hemlock, rattlesnake venom and arsenic. Welcome back to 1800.

For those of you that were sick and missed the lectures in dental school when the healing properties of homeopathy were revealed, here is the epiphany. Hepar Sulfuris Clacereum in a 30C dilution will treat dental abscesses and painful bleeding gums. For the pain of a root canal, tooth extraction or dry socket either a 6x or a 30C dilution (manufacturers disagree) of Hypericum Perforatum (St. John's Wort) is the ticket. Use this knowledge wisely. May the force be with you.

Why pick on homeopathy? After all, if there is little or no substance in a pill, then you certainly can't harm a patient. I select homeopathy as my target because it typifies so much that is wrong with much of alternative medicine. Bizarre origins, little or no scientific basis, devoted adherents, anecdotal cures, and big profits (prophets?) are all too typical. Many alternative therapies have even more bizarre origins, more apostolic adherents and, of course, may not be so harmless. And is no medicine (remember 2 billion pills to receive one molecule) harmless? Not if scientific medicine is discarded in its place or if we lie to our patients to access the non-specific placebo effect. Is anything short of the truth wrong? That's another essay, but allow me to go way out on the judgmental limb and say "Yes!" Our obligation is always to seek the truth. We don't even have all the questions, but the quest (I'm not talking about windmills) should be ongoing. If that is not one of our guiding principles, then we have failed as professionals, not to mention our obligations as earthlings. As pleasant or tempting as the words alternative or complimentary may sound, don't ever trade the Avogadro trump card for the Hahnemann joker.

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