

# Letters to the Editor

Send your letters to the Editor,  
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Priority will be given to letters less than 500 words long.  
Authors must sign the letter, which may be edited for reasons of space.

## AN INAPPROPRIATE CHALLENGE

Sir, there is an interesting and ongoing debate about the ethics of using placebos in medicine, so I was disappointed that the response to *Unethical aspects of homeopathic dentistry*<sup>1</sup> has focused instead on disputing the overwhelming scientific consensus that homeopathy is baseless and unproven.<sup>2-5</sup>

It is well known that people are prone to trust experiences and evidence that support their preconceptions. It is therefore inappropriate to challenge such an established consensus in the letters and opinion pages, particularly by citing personal experiences, individual studies and one's own website. To make a convincing case, a large, unbiased systematic review is needed. The Cochrane Collaboration has already done this for several conditions,<sup>6-10</sup> but has yet to find compelling evidence of any benefit. Usually, few or no well-conducted trials exist.

In the absence of evidence that homeopathy works, one is forced to estimate its *priori* plausibility as the homeopaths do – by comparing it to experience. The two founding principles of homeopathy are that a patient presenting with a given symptom is best cured by a substance known to cause that symptom, and that diluting medicine makes it stronger – including well beyond the point where no medicine remains. I wonder how your readers' clinical experiences compare to these principles.

A. Taylor, Manchester

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## USEFUL REMEDIES

Sir, I was delighted to read the excellent defence of homeopathy in dentistry by Drs Eames and Darby in the recent *BDJ* (*BDJ* 2011; **210**: 299-301).

I have used homeopathy very successfully in my practice for many years and wouldn't like to be without it.

There are particularly useful remedies for aphthous ulcers and cold sores which get rid of these troublesome conditions within a day or so.

Nat mur 200 is astonishingly good for developing cold sores at the vesicle stage – they disappear within 24 hours and don't return for weeks. Arnica is famous for its usefulness in bruising and general trauma – fantastic after a difficult extraction.

My patients really appreciate this small but very useful aspect of my practice. We may not understand how homeopathy works (and many other things too for that matter) but there's no doubt that it does. One day we'll have the explanation.

D. G. Horobin, Bexleyheath

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## A SUBSTANTIAL GAP

Sir, I write in regard to *Homeopathy and its ethical use in dentistry* (*BDJ* 2011; **210**: 299-301). Any ethical practice involving homeopathy must necessarily begin by telling the patient that it is

scientifically implausible; for homeopathy to be valid most of what we know about chemistry and physics would have to be not just wrong but spectacularly wrong. Unfortunately this would undermine the placebo effect and the counselling nature of the consultation.<sup>1</sup>

Science has advanced in the last 200 years in a way that homeopathy simply has not; indeed, one (possibly the most) prominent homeopath, George Vithoulkas, has chided homeopaths for failing to follow the letter of Hahnemann's 'Organon'. In a comment on the Nature blogs, Vithoulkas says: 'to tear down a therapeutic system by examining and evaluating its theory instead of its therapeutic results is quite inappropriate. Until a few years ago, we did not know how aspirin works, yet it was the most frequently prescribed drug in conventional medicine.'

The point not noticed by Vithoulkas or made in the article is this: with drugs, no principles of science are violated; while the mechanism may be unknown in detail, it is plausible and consistent with other branches of knowledge, so the hierarchy of evidence may safely place clinical trials at the apex because the basic premises on which the proposed intervention are based are widely understood and accepted, the evidence gap is small and specific. With homeopathy the gap is substantial.

Disease is not caused by 'miasms' as Hahnemann believed and the basic principles of homeopathy, 'the law of similia', 'potentization' and 'the law of infinitesimals' are articles of faith, not laws of nature. There is no credible evidence that any one of them is a valid generalisable principle. Are we really to believe that powerful healing can result from forces unmeasurable by any scientific instrument?