Homeopathic veterinary medicine

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Private Practice, Los Angeles, CA
60 publications, 294 citations

Johannes Thomas Lumeij
Utrecht University
181 publications, 2,500 citations

Silvan R Urfer
University of Washington Seattle
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Philip Johnson
University of Liverpool
653 publications, 34,292 citations

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Dutch Wildlife Biobank View project

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Homeopathic veterinary medicine

SIR, – On August 20, *The Veterinary Record* published a studiously neutral review of homeopathy in veterinary practice (Hektoen 2005). Ironically, only a week later *The Lancet* dared to reach a conclusion on the subject (in human medicine); ‘Surely the time has passed for selective analyses, biased reports, or further investment in research to perpetuate the . . . debate. Now doctors need to be bold and honest with their patients about homoeopathy’s lack of benefit . . . ’ (Editorial, August 27).

Attempts to achieve even-handedness often lead to disproportionate credibility being accorded to the weaker side, and this is evident in Dr Hektoen’s paper. Despite acknowledging that homeopathy is not rational, she appears to accept the homeopaths’ glib explanations of similars and potentisation, and to suggest we look favourably on the practice based solely on ‘the public interest and the positive experience that clients and therapists clearly indicate having’ What about the experiences of the animals?, one might ask.

The lengthy reference list mainly cites proponent publications, omitting the papers describing credible controlled trials of homeopathy in veterinary patients, all four of which report no difference between treated and control groups (Taylor and others 1989, Scott and others 2002, de Verdier and others 2003, Holmes and others 2005). The third of these concludes, ‘In the European Union this implies a considerable risk for animal welfare, since in some countries priority is given to homeopathic treatments in organic farming.’

Also omitted was an examination of homeopathic provings, which were erroneously stated to involve giving ‘material doses of the substance . . . to healthy individuals’, when in fact these are performed with the same extreme dilutions used for treatment. The process often lacks control subjects and is never properly blinded, with much of the output relating to emotional and psychological matters. The extrapolation of these subjective experiences to animal patients is a paradox of veterinary homeopathy, as remedies are never proved on animals.

Essentially, homeopathy is a narrative exercise. An extensive repertoire of explanations has been developed, with anything that might happen following the administration of a remedy (including deterioration) being covered in terms of the remedy ‘working’. Inevitably, positive perceptions are reported, as almost any experience is capable of being interpreted as positive.

This review invokes special pleading for an admittedly non-scientific method based on the fact that some very vocal and enthusiastic people seem to like it, together with an exaggerated view of the value of the placebo effect. In human medicine, a positive change in the attitude of the patient may arguably be a genuine benefit. However, what benefit can it be to an animal to apply rose-coloured spectacles to its owner?

Is it not now time to join with *The Lancet* in calling for an end to the ‘politically correct laissez faire attitude’, and remember that we are a scientific profession, concerned with objective benefits for our patients, rather than with popularity and turf protection?

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SIR, – In the August 20 issue of The Veterinary Record (vol 157, pp 224-229), Dr Hektoen has provided an eloquent pass-
dge dealing with homeopathy, yet has also
managed to avoid some rather sobering
facts. Unless 200 years of science is wrong,
homeopathy does not, and cannot, work.

When compared with placebo, there is no
single disease that responds better to
homeopathic treatment and no single
homeopathic drug that is significantly
more effective (Ernst 2002, Shang and
others 2005).

However, science and fact do not appear to
have anything to do with homeo-
pathy. Thus, the only real question is not
why homeopathy may appear to work;
rather, why anyone thinks that it does
work. As such, more studies, better studies,
may be such a provocation that leads
this is understandable and no surprise. It
may be such a provocation that leads
Baker and colleagues and Ramey and col-
leagues into describing my stands and
attitude towards homeopathy and such
that I do not recognise, and that I do not
think can be supported by what I have
written in the paper (Hektoen 2005).

First, I do not accept the homeopathic
principles of similars and potentisation.
These descriptions of these principles is
included as background information, and
I assume that the readers of The Veteri-
inary Record are able to assess the
scientific limitations of these principles
themselves. Secondly, I would like to
point out that the paper is not a system-
atic review trying to evaluate the efficacy
base regarding efficacy of homeopathic
remedies. Therefore, no specific clinical
trials are mentioned in the text, and thus
one is omitted, not consciously and not
unconsciously. However, the most impor-
tant systematic reviews and meta-analy-
ses that were available at the time the
paper was written are referred to in the
text. These were included to illustrate the
status and amount of clinical research in
this field, as well as the controversy of
their conclusions (see, for example, Ernst
2002).

However, even if I agree with the
‘impossibility of homeopathy’, I do still
think that it is justified to take an interest
in this phenomenon. I also find it possible
and justified to do research in this field,
even when rejecting the homeopathic
principles (although I am fully aware that
there are many different views on this
question as well). What makes the utilisa-
tion of homeopathy an interesting phe-
onomenon from my point of view is the
clash between the ‘unexplainable and
unbelievable homeopathic theory’ and the
numerous patients (or in veterinary medicine their owners) who utilise homeo-
pathic remedies and apparently experi-
ence positive effects. These effects may
be mediated by other mechanisms than spe-
cific effects of the remedies as such, but
may still be valuable. Some of the ques-

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Shang, A., Huwiler-Muntener, K.,
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Pewnsner, D. & Egger, M. (2005) Are the clin-
ical effects of homeopathy placebo effects?
Comparative study of placebo-controlled trials
of homeopathy and allopathy. Lancet 366, 726-
732

Dr Hektoen replies: Homeopathy has exis-
ted for about 200 years. It has survived
through several periods of popularity and
decline, but has always had the ability to
prove. Due to the implausibility that the
highly diluted homeopathic remedies have
any specific effects, as well as the lack of
documentation of clinical effects in the
treatment of human or animal disease, this
is understandable and no surprise. It
may be such a provocation that leads
Baker and colleagues and Ramey and col-
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attitude towards homeopathy and such
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732
tions raised are: Why do patients/owners choose a therapy that most medical doctors or veterinarians oppose? What motivates their decisions? Are they ‘fooled’, and if they are, by whom? How are these seemingly positive experiences mediated, and what implications does the utilisation of homeopathic remedies have for animal health and welfare?

A couple of years ago I interviewed a group of dairy farmers using homeopathic remedies as a part of their herd health management (Hektoen 2004). I did this in order to improve the understanding of the question ‘Why and how do dairy farmers use homeopathy?’. Positive experiences from treatment of personal health problems, desire to reduce the use of antibacterial drugs, positive effect in herd health management and the desire to find alternatives when conventional veterinary medicine had no good solutions to offer were some of the factors motivating this use. Looking at health and production parameters, the only difference between the treated herds and control herds in which homeopathy was not used was a significantly lower use of antibacterial drugs in the herds using homeopathy. There were no obvious indications of negative implications for animal health or welfare. This does, of course, not demonstrate that the homeopathic remedies have any specific effects (most likely these results reflect a high clinical cure rate in cases of clinical mastitis). However, it demonstrates that these farmers are able to fulfil their aims of producing high-quality milk and reducing the utilisation of antibacterial drugs through the use of homeopathic remedies. This was a very important aim for them, and even though I am not able to support the homeopathic principles, I am able to understand that the farmers appreciate this as a good result.

These same farmers also provided an interesting perspective in relation to the statement: ‘Now doctors need to be bold and honest with their patients about homeopathy’s lack of benefit’, quoted by Baker and others. These farmers all knew that homeopathic remedies are highly diluted, and they all found it hard to understand that these remedies could have any effect in disease treatment. However, the lack of understanding and documentation of effect was not important to them. They valued personal experience far more highly than scientific evidence or the opposition to homeopathy encountered within the veterinary profession. Therefore, I doubt that homeopathy will ‘disappear’ no matter how much the medical or veterinary professions dislike it or argue against it, and I doubt that studies like the one of Shang and others (2005) will end the discussion or the use of homeopathy. How we as veterinarians should relate to homeopathy is not basically a question of whether we should include an ‘unscientific discipline’ into our repertoire, legally allowed or not. It is more a question of how to relate to the owners who are using homeopathy for their animals. In my opinion it will probably be more beneficial for animal health and welfare to conduct an open dialogue than to display a completely critical attitude, also in the face of disagreement. The background for this is basically that it will reduce the risk that the owners will not also seek advice from conventional veterinary medicine. This is especially important in severe cases.

For me, the utilisation of homeopathy is an excellent example of the fact that veterinary medicine and decision-making in issues related to animal health and welfare in general is much more than medical interventions and their specific effects. The interest in homeopathic treatment among farmers and pet owners is in many ways a reflection of the inadequacy of conventional veterinary medicine to take into account their experiences, aims and personal motivations, and thus an inability to solve their problems. Dialogue does not automatically imply acceptance, but in the same way that patient-centred medicine may provide benefits within human medicine, a more client-centred medicine may provide benefits within veterinary medicine, also for the animals (see, for example, Shaw and others 2004). Studying the ‘unscientific utilisation of homeopathy’ has taught me a lot about farmers, their decision-making processes and also a lot about myself and the limitations of what I provide as a traditional, conventional veterinarian. This knowledge is relevant far beyond the question of specific effects of homeopathic remedies.

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David Ramey, Arnold Goldman, Moe Milstein, David Haas, Howard C. Robinson, Paul R. Plante, J. T. Lumeij, Mike Graper, Robert Imrie, Valerie Devaney, Silvan Urfer, Philip J. Johnson, Rosalind Dalefield, Paula Yankauskas, David H. Jaggar and Eric Reinertson

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