

Homeopathy is witchcraft, say doctors

The Telegraph (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/alternative-medicine/7728281/Homeopathy-is-witchcraft-say-doctors.html>) · by Tim Wigmore

Hundreds of members of the BMA have passed a motion denouncing the use of the alternative medicine, saying taxpayers should not foot the bill for remedies with no scientific basis to support them.

The BMA has previously expressed scepticism about homoeopathy, arguing that the rationing body, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence should examine the evidence base and make a definitive ruling about the use of the remedies in the NHS.

Now, the annual conference of junior doctors has gone further, with a vote overwhelmingly supporting a blanket ban, and an end to all placements for trainee doctors which teach them homeopathic principles.

Dr Tom Dolphin, deputy chairman of the BMA's junior doctors committee in England told the conference: "Homeopathy is witchcraft. It is a disgrace that nestling between the National Hospital for Neurology and Great Ormond Street [in London] there is a National Hospital for Homeopathy which is paid for by the NHS".

The alternative medicine, devised in the 18th century by the German physician Samuel Hahnemann, is based on a theory that substances which cause symptoms in a healthy person can, when vastly diluted, cure the same problems in a sick person.

Proponents say the resulting remedy retains a "memory" of the original ingredient – a concept dismissed by scientists.

Latest figures show 54,000 patients are treated each year at four NHS homeopathic hospitals in London, Glasgow, Bristol and Liverpool, at an estimated cost of £4 million.

A fifth hospital in Tunbridge Wells in Kent was forced to close last year when local NHS funders stopped paying for treatments.

Gordon Lehany, chairman of the BMA's junior doctors committee in Scotland said it was wrong that some junior doctors were spending part of their training rotations in homeopathic hospitals, learning principles which had no place in science.

He told the conference in London last weekend: "At a time when the NHS is struggling for cash we should be focusing on treatments that have proven benefit. If people wish to pay for homoeopathy that's their choice but it shouldn't be paid for on the NHS until there is evidence that it works."

The motion was supported by BMA Chairman Dr Hamish Meldrum, though it will only become official policy of the whole organisation if it is agreed by their full conference next month.

In February a report by MPs said the alternative medicine should not receive state funding.

The Commons science and technology committee also said vials of the remedies should not be allowed to use phrases like "used to treat" in their marketing, as consumers might think there is clinical evidence that they work.

In evidence to the committee, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain said there was no possible reason why such treatments, marketed by an industry worth £40 million in this country, could be effective scientifically.

Advocates of homoeopathy say even if the effect of the remedies is to work as a placebo, they are chosen by thousands of people, and do not carry the risks and side effects of many mainstream medicines.

A survey carried out at England's NHS homeopathic hospitals found 70 per cent of patients said they felt some improvement after undergoing treatment.

Crystal Sumner, chief executive of the British Homeopathic Association (BHA), said attempts to stop the NHS funding alternative medicines ignored the views of the public, especially patients with chronic conditions.

She said: " Homeopathy helps thousands of people who are not helped by conventional care. We don't want it to be a substitute for mainstream care, but when people are thinking about making cuts to funding, I think they need to consider public satisfaction, and see that homoeopathy has a place in medicine."

She said junior doctors' calls for an end to any training placements based in homeopathic hospitals ignored the lessons alternative medicine could provide, in terms of how to diagnose patients.

Estimates on how much the NHS spends on homoeopathy vary. The BHA says the NHS spends about £4 million a year on homeopathic services, although the Department of Health says spending on the medicines themselves is just £152,000 a year.

Two weeks ago, a charity founded by the Prince of Wales to promote alternative medicines announced plans to shut down, days after a former senior official was arrested on suspicion of fraud and money laundering.

The Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health said its plans to close had been brought forward as a result of a fraud investigation at the charity.

George Gray, a former chief executive of the organisation, and his wife Gillian were arrested by Scotland Yard officers last month in an early-morning raid on their home in North London.

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