



Beliefs about homeopathy among patients presenting at GP surgeries

Current best evidence does not support the use of homeopathy for any indication,¹ although the practice of homeopathy nevertheless appears to be a thriving.²

We were interested to explore lay people's understanding of homeopathy and the range of conditions for which it has been used in a New Zealand setting. Specifically, we were interested in the views of those currently seeking out conventional treatments by presenting at their local GP, as one might reasonably expect to find generally sceptical views among people currently consulting traditional medical practitioners than, for example, among customers of health food stores.

Brief self-reporting questionnaires were made available to patients in three GP surgeries in the North Island of New Zealand whilst they were awaiting their consultation. Patients were asked to report their age and gender, whether they know what homeopathy is, whether they believe there is good scientific evidence that homeopathy works, how concentrated are homeopathic preparations, and whether homeopathy should be made available as part of the public health system. They were also asked what conditions they had used homeopathy for and whether they believed that it helped.

Following a 4-week data collection period, 124 completed questionnaires were returned by participating surgeries. The mean age of respondents was 46.3 years (*SD* 17.8 years); 20 were male, 103 were female and 1 did not report. Although the mean age of males was 4.9 years greater than females, this difference was not statistically significant.

Participants' responses regarding their understanding of homeopathy and its perceived effectiveness are shown in the two tables below.

Item	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	No firm opinion	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly	No answer
I know what homeopathy is	52	53	13	2	3	1
There is good scientific evidence that homeopathy works	41	41	31	6	2	3
Homeopathy should be available as part of the public health system	56	32	26	3	2	5

Item	Very concentrated	Moderately concentrated	Moderately dilute	Very dilute	Nothing there	No answer
How concentrated are homeopathic products?	20	39	21	18	6	20

Eighty participants (65%) indicated that they had used homeopathic products for conditions including bruises, coughs, depression, eczema, joint pain, skin problems, sinuses, and stress. Of these patients, the most frequent response regarding

effectiveness (see table below) was that homeopathy appeared to work ‘most times’. (Due to the extensive range of conditions, it was not possible to explore effectiveness by condition treated.) More than 92% of users believed that homeopathy helped at least sometimes and 65% of users believed that it helped most times or every time.

Item	Every time	Most times	Sometimes	Never	No answer
How often does homeopathy help?	11	41	22	4	2

Contrary to expectation, our survey suggests that among patients consulting orthodox medical practitioners, the majority of respondents believe that they understand how homeopathy works, that it is supported by scientific evidence, is concentrated, and helps the condition for which it was being taken.

These findings suggest that scientific evidence is not communicated well to the lay public, but, contrarily, homeopathy is being marketed effectively and still has considerable appeal to general members of the public. In addition, as most homeopathy users believed that it works despite the complete lack of scientific plausibility or evidence, there must be other explanations for its apparent success including placebo responses and confusion between clinical improvements due to homeopathy and the natural history of the illness.

Shaun Holt
Tauranga

Andrew Gilbey
Palmerston North

References:

1. Ernst E. A systematic review of systematic reviews of homeopathy. *Br J Clin Pharmacol.* 2002; 54(6):577–82.
2. Gilbey, A. Ninety years’ growth of New Zealand complementary and alternative medicine *N Z Med J.* 2009;122(1291):111–3. <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/122-1291/3520>