



May 2015

Position

The RACGP supports the use of evidence-based medicine, in which current research information is used as the basis for clinical decision-making.

In light of strong evidence to confirm that homeopathy has no effect beyond that of placebo as a treatment for various clinical conditions, the position of the RACGP is:

1. Medical practitioners should not practice homeopathy, refer patients to homeopathic practitioners, or recommend homeopathic products to their patients.
2. Pharmacists should not sell, recommend, or support the use of homeopathic products.
3. Homeopathic alternatives should not be used in place of conventional immunisation.
4. Private health insurers should not supply rebates for or otherwise support homeopathic services or products.

Background

The contention that homeopathy is an effective treatment is not supported by evidence from systematic literature reviews. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) analysed the scientific evidence for the effectiveness of homeopathy in treating a range of clinical conditions and released a position statement¹ in March 2015. The NHMRC's review concluded homeopathy does not produce health benefits over and above that of placebo, or equivalent to that of another treatment.² Crucially, the report states that there are "no health conditions for which there is reliable evidence that homeopathy is effective" as a treatment.

While not covered in the NHMRC's review, it is also the case that homeopathic alternatives to conventional vaccination do not prevent communicable diseases or increase protective antibodies to disease. The National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance has advised that there are no studies of sufficient quality to demonstrate the safety or effectiveness of 'homeopathic vaccines' for protection against disease.³ Indeed, there is no plausible biological mechanism of action by which these products could prevent infection.⁴

Harms associated with homeopathy

Homeopathic products are sometimes considered harmless as they are generally administered at a high dilution. Some may not even contain a single molecule of the original source material. However, there are a number of risks associated with the use of homeopathy.

Delaying or avoiding conventional medical care

When the use of homeopathy causes a person to delay or avoid consultation with a registered medical practitioner or reject conventional medical approaches, serious and sometimes fatal consequences can occur. As evidenced by recent Australian court findings, spurious claims made by homeopathic practitioners⁵ and retailers⁶ can mislead individuals about the effectiveness of conventional medicine.

When homeopathic vaccines are used as an alternative to conventional immunisation, both the individual and the community are left exposed to preventable diseases.

Problems associated with unregulated products

Although homeopathic products manufactured in Australia are regulated as medicines under the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989, products sold on international websites may not meet Australian quality and safety standards. These products may be of particular concern when materials from problematic sources are employed in the preparation (e.g., pathogenic organs or tissues; causative agents such as bacteria, fungi, parasites, ova, yeast, and virus particles; disease products; excretions or secretions; heavy metals and toxins such as aconitum, kerosene and thallium). Impurities of source material and contamination associated with poor manufacturing processes also present threats to the quality and safety of these products.⁷

Direct adverse effects

Various direct harms associated with the use of homeopathic products have been noted in the literature, including allergic reaction, drug interactions, and complications related to the ingestion of toxic substances.⁸

The importance of patient-centred practice

The RACGP supports the concept of patient-centred practice, in which the values, preferences, and personal healthcare philosophy of the patient are respected and individuals play an important role in their own healthcare. An estimated six per cent of Australians use homeopathy over the course of a year.⁹ It is important that these patients feel comfortable in discussing their use of complementary and alternative medicines with all members of their treatment team.

It is good practice for medical practitioners to initiate conversations with patients about their use of or intention to use homeopathy, and assist patients to think critically about the efficacy and safety of homeopathy so that they may make informed healthcare decisions.

Private health insurance and homeopathy

Many private health insurers provide ancillary (extras) cover that subsidises homeopathic treatment, and the individual's costs in taking out this cover are subsidised under the Australian Government's private health insurance rebate. The RACGP is concerned that health insurance premiums continue to rise as funds disburse significant sums for the use of homeopathy and other natural therapies lacking rigorous evidentiary support. In the 2013–14 financial year, health insurers paid out \$164 million in benefits for natural therapies, up by almost 60 per cent from 2010–11.¹⁰

The RACGP also notes that offering subsidies for the use of homeopathy sends a confusing message to consumers. Listing homeopathic treatments alongside evidence-based modalities in a list of member benefits lends legitimacy to a practice that is not supported by scientific data.

References

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