

A glass mortar and pestle is shown from a top-down perspective, tilted slightly. The mortar is filled with white, round pills. Several pills have spilled out onto a light blue surface, creating a soft, blurred effect. The background is a gradient of light blue and white.

Natalie Grams

# Homeopathy Reconsidered

What Really Helps Patients

 Springer

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Heidelberg, Germany

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## Preface to the English Edition

This book is not only a story but it also has a story. It is not actually a scientific publication but is based on scientific thinking and principles. It is not a biography but it does also tell a personal story. I would like to explain that in this preface.

The book was first published in German in 2015 and was intended for all those interested in homeopathy, especially the practitioners, to express certain theses in which I reject the untenable parts of homeopathy but try to show a way to integrate the parts of it that seem to be worth preserving into modern medicine. With this book, the fundamental discussion about homeopathy as part of the health system and its claim to be medicine within medicine has been brought to life again in Germany—with unexpected intensity. And this has affected me personally—I suddenly stood in a prominent position, both with regard to media interest in the newly created public debate and in the sharp, sometimes very personal criticism I received from the homeopathic scene—which was the original target group for this book.

I was a free-practising homeopathic physician in Heidelberg from 2009 to 2015. During my medical studies, I was already not only convinced but honestly enthusiastic about homeopathy. I leapt on the first opportunity to take over a homeopathic practice. I was quite successful in my profession and my patients gave me a lot of positive feedback.

That is the beginning of my personal story, and it could have gone on like this, but...

One day I was interviewed by a journalist who was researching for a critical book on homeopathy. Actually, I was convinced that I had represented homeopathy well in the interview. Because of that, I was utterly speechless when I finally held the published book in my hands, for it spared no criticism

of homeopathy—without appreciating anything of what had seemed to me in the interview to be an excellent defence of the method. Spontaneously, I decided to come up with an alternative draft and began to work my way into the literature and scientific study and assessment of homeopathy.

Well, to cut a long story short, it was incredibly difficult for me but as I went ahead with this work, more and more illusions about homeopathy which I had hitherto harboured began to fall away from me every day. I gradually came to realize that there were no sound or convincing reasons for it and its assumptions. I also had to realize that science, in its rejection of homeopathy, was not playing a conspiratorial role but took on the issues at hand with great seriousness and impartiality. That's how my book came about—but it went in a completely different direction to the one originally intended: a very critical direction. In this book, I tried to justify the worthlessness of the clearly untenable parts of the homeopathic theory and to leave them behind me. But I was so attached to the method at that time that I put a lot of effort into working out positive, medically relevant features, and gave suggestions for how one might make it usable for daily medical practice on a scientific basis.

For me personally, this meant abandoning my life plan. While I was still working on my book, I decided with a heavy heart to close my private homeopathic practice. In some passages of the book, I still speak in the tone of the practising homeopath—but at the time of printing, it was over. It was a very hard time, both on the way to this decision and afterwards, in many ways. Today I work in science communication, for the German Skeptics Society and as a freelance author.

From my current point of view, however, the book still seems to me almost like a defence of homeopathy, although it clearly rejects the notions of the principle of similarity, of increasing the effectiveness of remedies through potentiation into the literally infinite, or of the spiritual vital force in man and the spiritual medicinal power in the remedy. But my attempts to save the idea of intensive attention to the patient, through conversation which is not limited to the physical symptoms, constitute an essential part of my reflections in the book.

And I still feel obliged for that today. Even if homeopaths never use my theses for a discourse that might ensure the survival of homeopathy as a medical method. On the contrary, among homeopaths today I am considered a *persona non grata*, a traitor. They refuse to move away from the untenable view that homeopathy can provide a specific drug therapy.

But something good has also come out of all this because it has allowed me to move forward by constantly broadening my horizons as I read further

studies and engage in many discussions with competent and well-meaning people from medical science, science in general, and the world beyond.

So this is the explanation for my introductory sentences. This book is a piece of personal history, and perhaps even a small piece of contemporary history. But it also expresses an admiration for science, reason, rationality, and not least honesty, all of which we owe to the patient in the medical profession, in addition to our expertise and sense of care. I am very pleased now to be able to present my book in English. I hope that it will give you the essential facts about homeopathy in a comprehensible way, but also and above all, through the example of my own history, what it means and how important it is to free yourself from deep misconceptions and prejudices, even if this may affect your own life plan.

The book should be readable for anyone interested, despite its scientific focus. Beyond the bibliography and references, I have therefore deliberately used references to and quotations from Wikipedia where possible. The Wikipedia references serve only as a quick introduction to terminology that some readers may not be familiar with. They are not meant as sources providing evidence in the strict scientific sense.

I have added another chapter to the original version of this book to tell you the “whole story”, including what has changed and evolved since the German edition was published.

I wish you an inspiring and thought-provoking read - and good health!

Heidelberg, Germany  
April 2018

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# 1

## How and On What Basis Does Homeopathy Treat?

Under homeopathic therapy, I have seen severe anxiety and depression disappear, malignant cancerous ulcers recede, and acute purulent tonsillitis cured.

And yes, I am fully aware that homeopathic medicines (globules) do not contain anything that can be held responsible for this effect - unless you ignore all the common laws of science.

I'm a doctor, so I studied medicine. And I've been a convinced homeopath for a long time. However, as a doctor, I am a scientist. Because of this, I was no longer able to live well with homeopathy, whose principles somehow *feel* good, but whose principles *completely contradict scientific thinking*. I also thought this was hardly a responsible attitude toward my patients. I lacked conclusive explanations about the mechanism of action and proof of effectiveness of homeopathy. With this book I would like to explore this gap in more detail and encourage a new dialogue.

I have written it as a kind of memorandum to make it clear that some of the points are my own thoughts and conclusions that remain to be discussed. It is not therefore a purely scientific treatise, even though in this book science will have much more say than it has done so far in homeopathy. The path was difficult for me, because it meant dealing with my own professional, but also ideological principles. Maybe you'll feel the same when you read it.

The starting point is this: every day, patients came to my practice and reported with emotion and relief that their complaints had improved since the beginning of treatment. And it was not always just a slight cold. No, I would treat patients with problems of severe addiction, anxiety, and depression, some of whom hadn't been able to live a normal life for weeks. I would treat patients

who had been undergoing therapy for years - be it psychological or conventional medical treatment: patients with cancer and other chronic diseases such as asthma, neurodermatitis, chronic inflammatory intestinal diseases, allergies, sleep disorders, pain, etc. How could they be helped by a method that has been proven to prescribe “nothing”? This question preoccupied me in my professional life, and I tried to pursue it as a physician trained in the natural sciences but also simply as an open-minded person. It was a big step for me, as an avowed homeopath, to realise that, despite the successes mentioned above and the great demand, there seem to be hardly any rational arguments in favour of homeopathy.

The fact is that proponents of the method believe, against all reasonable arguments, in the effects of the white beads full of nothing, and they see their ideas as being sufficiently confirmed by the success of their treatments. When asked how the effects are to be explained, they are either evasive or turn all the principles of logic and science upside-down in their argumentation. Perhaps the resistance of homeopaths to the demand for scientific proof of efficacy is so great because they think they can establish it by inspection, merely by observing that “homeopathy works”. Critics and opponents of homeopathy, on the other hand, consider these recorded treatment successes to be an error of faith, something that is not based on a principle of cause and effect, and that can only be explained by the good old placebo effect. Some of those critics do not necessarily find fault with this, as long as it does not prevent the right medical measures from being taken if danger is imminent. At the end of the day, they just appeal to homeopaths to provide reliable evidence for this anecdotal efficacy and to explain the mode of action.

On the one hand, it is a fact that many patients turn to homeopathic treatment and claim that it helps them. On the other, I can also confirm that there is a whole range of cases where homeopathic treatment has had no effect at all. And that it even failed to achieve a placebo effect. One of my teachers of homeopathy who is well known for his treatment successes once said in a seminar: “If the effect of homeopathy were based solely on the placebo effect, then my success rate should be 100% - because the patients come to me from far away with great expectations, as a last resort, and under the pressure of great suffering; they have to wait a long time for an appointment, but I then devote all my time and ability exclusively and intensively to them, for a number of hours. However, I only reach 50% - so it must be something else.”

Unfortunately, he did not say what might have been the reason for this, nor how he would explain the effect otherwise (apart from the error in reasoning that a placebo effect must occur in 100% of the treated cases). For me this remained unsatisfactory, and I had to ask myself this: if it's clear that there is no active ingredient and above all no “energy” in the homeopathic medicines

to which one can attribute an effect, why do so many people still benefit from treatment based on such a (nonsensical) method? What is true about Hahnemann's theories that they are still so persistent, contrary to all reason? When did he develop homeopathy and how has medicine progressed since then? Which parts of his construct can still be justified in the 21st century? Why do patients continue to turn to homeopathy in such large numbers? Where is homeopathy vulnerable and where can we learn something from it? Where is homeopathy really nonsense? And where is our conventional medicine a nonsense of another kind?

According to Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, there are two ways of thinking: intuitive, automatic, fast thinking and conscious, rational, logical, laborious, slow thinking (Kahneman 2012). When they think about it intuitively and quickly, many people simply find homeopathy good. But what are the specific features that lead to this good feeling? And how can we, with our much slower scientific thinking, put such a feeling into figures, data, and facts so that both can be satisfied - the good feeling of so many patients who turn to homeopathy, but also the science that underlies modern medicine today?

To begin with, let me give an example of the course of a homeopathic treatment. Mrs. M. has been telling me about her persistent back pain for half an hour. I confine myself to listening, taking notes, watching the patient. When she stops, I encourage her with a simple "Tell me more". After some time listening and observing, I notice that certain topics come up more than once. On several occasions she reports a feeling of "being tied up" and having a stiffness in her back when the pain is very severe. She feels trapped or as though tightly gripped by something, and the worst situations are when she is resting, at night, or when she can't move. Subsequently, she reports that she felt trapped in her marriage, which had been a painful experience, and that it had taken her a long time to free herself from it. Somehow, she also connects the pain with her marriage. Yes, when she thinks about it now, her whole life has been influenced by a hitherto unconscious feeling of being *cramped and constrained*, of being *unable to move*. She has always been better off outside, where she is able to take in some fresh air. This tends to counter bad moods and back pain. Right now, at this very moment, she has the feeling that the pain has subsided, because she has realized that somehow it has always been about these topics in her life. She has been stressed by this all along. In her childhood she was rather wild and restless, always happy to move around. Since she has no longer been able to do this, she has felt restricted and discouraged - and completely ossified.

About an hour has passed at this point, and I have not made any findings or carried out any examination. An orthopaedic colleague would already have taken care of this, but unfortunately without being able to find a clear cause of the complaints. As a homeopath, I only try to find a kind of individual guiding