

Homeopathic Medicine and the Immune System

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Jonas Salk, with both eloquence and simplicity, once stated that there are two primary approaches to treating ill people. He said that there are therapeutic techniques that directly impact specific symptoms, and there are methods that stimulate the body's own immune and defense system.

Whereas conventional medical treatments today tend to focus on the former goal of treating or controlling symptoms, various natural therapeutics primarily attend to the latter goal of augmenting the person's own inherent defenses. Although the direct treatment of symptoms often has immediate effects, its benefits tend to be short-term. Because such therapeutic interventions do not usually strengthen the person's own defenses, the individual remains prone to recurrence of their problem.

In contrast, therapeutic methods that strengthen a person's immune and defense system has longer term benefit and can prevent recurrence, but the benefit is sometimes achieved more slowly. In addition to have effects on a person's immune system, research described in [a respected pharmacology journal](#) have confirmed that homeopathic medicines have a significant effect on gene expression, providing solid evidence for similar physiological effects for which conventional drugs are known to operate.

These generalizations about therapeutic methods are, however, just that, generalizations. There are plenty of exceptions, but these generalizations create a useful framework from which to evaluate the benefits and limitations of various therapeutic approaches.

Homeopathy and Immune Response

Homeopathy obviously fits into the class of therapeutic methods that augment the body's own defenses. The basis of homeopathy, called the principle of similars, suggests that a microdose of a substance will heal whatever pattern of symptoms this substances causes in large dose. This principle is also observed in the use of vaccinations and allergy treatments, though homeopathic medicines are both considerably smaller and safer in dose and more individualized to the person they are being used to treat.

Although homeopathic medicines are thought to stimulate the body's own defenses, how they do so remains a mystery. One study published in the **European Journal of Pharmacology**¹ showed that a homeopathic medicine, *Silicea*, stimulated macrophages (macrophages are a part of the body's immune system which engulf bacteria and foreign

substances). How or why *Silicea* was able to have this action or why exceedingly small doses of it are so active is unknown. In the same way that physicians and pharmacologists do not understand how many drugs work, we do not understand how homeopathic medicine actually work.

Homeopathic medicine do not simply stimulate the body's immune system to treat ill people, for they can also calm it when this is necessary for the healing of the individual. An example of this latter effect was observed in a study of the homeopathic treatment of people with rheumatoid arthritis, a condition which is considered an autoimmune illness. People with auto-immune ailments suffer because their body's immune system is over-active and it attacks the person's own cells, not just bacteria, viruses, or foreign substances.

This study on 46 people with rheumatoid arthritis showed that those given an individualized choice of homeopathic medicine got considerably more relief than those given a placebo.² A total of 82% of those people given a homeopathic medicine experienced relief of pain, while only 21% of those given a placebo got a similar degree of relief.

Homeopathy and Infectious Diseases

Toward the end of Louis Pasteur's life, he had come to realize that germs may not be the *cause* of disease after all, but instead are probably the *results* of disease. In other words, various bacteria and other infective organisms may be present when there is some type of disease, but infection tends to establish itself primarily when a person's own defenses are compromised sufficiently to make him susceptible to the infection.

Louis Pasteur's realization at the end of his life has, however, gone unnoticed by most conventional physicians and by the public at large. When a person experiences an infection, most people think that it is best to take an antibiotic for bacterial infection and an anti-viral drug for viral infection. There are, however, problems with such drugs. Besides the various side effects they cause and the various instances in which they are not effective, even when they are effective their usage tends to increase the chances of infective agents to adapt to the drugs, thereby reducing the chance that the drugs will be effective in the future.

As Jonas Salk noted, instead of trying to attack a specific problem, another strategy to re-establish health is to attempt to stimulate a person's own immune and defense system, which is ultimately the approach commonly used with homeopathic medicines.

Most people today do not know that homeopathy actually gained its greatest popularity in Europe and America during the mid- and late-1800s primarily due to the significant successes it achieved in treating people suffering from the often fatal infectious disease epidemics that raged during that time.³ Cholera, typhoid, yellow fever, and scarlet fever were but some of the infectious diseases that homeopathic medicines were exceptionally effective in treating.

These natural medicines were not effective because they “attacked” the infective agent, but because they stimulated the body’s own immune and defense system to defend and heal itself.

Ideal Medicines?

There are no specific homeopathic medicines which are thought to be more effective than others in augmenting a person’s own immune and defense system. Each homeopathic medicine is thought to be effective when it is properly prescribed. The trick is to find the correct homeopathic medicine that fits the person’s unique pattern of symptoms.

For instance, **Arsenicum album** (white arsenic) is a very common homeopathic medicine. There are numerous acute and chronic conditions for which it is effective in treating, ranging from food poisoning and digestive disorders, to fatigue and various anxiety states, and to asthma and insomnia. **Arsenicum album** is not effective because it has antibiotic properties or stimulating or sedative effects. It is effective according to basic homeopathic principles because it has the capacity to heal those specific patterns of symptoms it is known to cause if taken in large dose. **Arsenicum album** will not be effective in treating a person whose symptoms do not match the symptoms that arsenic is known to cause.

There are various books that help people to find the correct single homeopathic medicine. This individualization of medicine is sometimes easy and sometimes hard. If a person does not know how to find the correct remedy or if this medicine is not readily available, it is often useful to use one of the various homeopathic formulas available to the general public.

Although some authors, including myself, have accidentally described homeopathic medicines as immunostimulating drugs, it may be more accurate to refer to them as immunomodulating drugs (drugs that stimulate a depressed immune system and that tone down an overactive immune system).

Immunomodulating effects from drugs may be the ideal effect that drug companies and physicians have longed for. Ironically, these drugs have been with us for a long time. Indeed, it is time to further investigate homeopathic medicines.

References

¹E. Davenas, B. Poitevin, and J. Benveniste, “Effect of Mouse Peritoneal Macrophages of Orally Administered Very High Dilutions of Silica,” *European Journal of Pharmacology*, 135 (April, 1987): 313-319.

²R.G. Gibson, S.L.M. Gibson, A.D. MacNeil, et al., “Homoeopathic Therapy in Rheumatoid Arthritis: Evaluation by Double-Blind Controlled Trial,” *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology*, 9(1980):453-459.

³D. Ullman, *Discovering Homeopathy: Medicine for the 21st Century*, Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1991, 39-40.