

Sources and Studies on the History of Homeopathic Medicine (Volume 17)

Marion Baschin, Die Geschichte der Selbstmedikation in der Homöopathie.

KVC Verlag, Essen 2012.

ISBN 978-3-86864-023-6

The German physician Samuel Hahnemann developed his system of treatment, homeopathy, at the beginning of the 19th century. His concept was meant as an "alternative" to the prevailing medical doctrines of the time. Whilst the majority of physicians rejected his new method, homeopathy enjoyed increasing popularity amongst lay people. This social and medical-historical investigation presents the tradition of self-medication in homeopathy as well as the history of over-the-counter sales of homeopathic medicines. It focuses on the question of how it was possible for homeopathy to establish itself as such a popular form of self-medication. It examines the factors through which self-treatment with the special preparations was promoted. The period of research ranges from the publication of the first edition of the *Organon* in the year 1810 to the second half of the 20th century.

Self-medication, taken to be treatment of oneself with non-prescription homeopathic remedies, is seldom mentioned directly in historical documents. To this end, the main sources for research are various homeopathic periodicals, which addressed laymen directly. They were also sets of instructions on how to heal illnesses oneself. They presented various medicines and their applications and provided information on advisory literature, pharmacies, their products and the activities of various homeopathic associations. These sources are supplemented by lay advisory literature and documents handed down from associations of lay homeopaths and pharmacies.

In the course of the investigation, it became clear that self-medication with homeopathic treatments was an integral part of Hahnemann's teachings, right from the very start. Generally, it can be said that self-medication, irrespective of the medicines used, has always been a basic element of medical care. There are several reasons why self-help with globules or tinctures had and has a significant role to play. They all contributed, in a somewhat complex manner, to the promotion of self-medication with homeopathic remedies.

The method of treatment devised by Samuel Hahnemann was characterised by several features which simplified consumption of homeopathic preparations without professional medical supervision considerably. Both the theory and practice of homeopathy were considered easy to learn and understand. A lay person need not grapple with the complex principles of internal bodily functions. After a study of the *Materia medica* and the various symptoms, they would, in principle, be able to determine the right medicament and to carry out a course of therapy. The special production of the homeopathic medicines, "dilution", also made self-medication easier. This method also rendered the remedies "safe". They have very few side effects, are almost tasteless and are considered "gentle", as they do not cause additional weakness in the patient.

Another factor contributing to the popularity of self-medication in homeopathy was the lack of trained physicians offering treatment using Hahnemann's methods. The number of trained homeopaths was always less than the level of demand for their services. In addition, like "allopathic" doctors, the homeopaths were primarily to be found in urban areas. Thus, the lack of trained homeopathic physicians more or less forced lay people to treat themselves. In spite of this fact, treatments by lay healers were always a matter of controversy amongst the medical profession.

When treating children, the lack of specialists also caused lay people to apply the homeopathic principles and treatments themselves. The successes achieved particularly in the treatment of severe diseases such as cholera or diphtheria, as well as countless other illnesses, helped homeopathy to achieve ever greater recognition and caused ever more people, from all social strata, to use the specially-prepared substances for both preventive medicine and treatments. In addition, the spread of homeopathy was aided by the fact that the medicines could also be used for the treatment of animals.

Popular lay advisory literature was available to ensure the "correct" application of the homeopathic remedies in the case of self-treatment. After the homeopathic physician Carl Caspari published the first work of this kind in 1826, the amount of homeopathic self-help literature on offer experienced a surge during the mid-1850s. Within 20 years advisory literature was available from both doctors and lay healers, and was available in every price category. To a greater or lesser extent, almost all the books made users aware that there were limits to self-medication and, in the case of "serious" illness, the advice of a homeopathic physician should be obtained.

The pharmacies and their range of products were one of the most important factors contributing to the popularity of self-medication. Homeopathic preparations were always amongst those remedies whose (primarily) prescription-free sale was restricted to pharmacies. At first, only a few pharmacists were considered sufficiently trustworthy to supply the medicines. By 1870 at the latest, there was serious competition amongst providers of such remedies. The inventiveness of the pharmacists and the demand for the homeopathic medicaments not only caused a continuous expansion of the product range but also competition for the "least expensive" among the pharmacies. The practical medicine chests, pocket and travel kits, which were sold in countless variants, ensured that the remedies were always at hand. A supply of reliable homeopathic products was guaranteed by the time of the outbreak of the First World War.

Lay people were supporters of homeopathy from the very start. In order to give more weight to their interests, they joined together to form associations from the 1830s onwards. Besides the spread of homeopathy, many of these organisations tried to encourage a homeopathic physician to settle in their community. However, this was rarely successful, meaning that self-help remained the order of the day. The associations offered various kinds of instructions and help for such activities. The lay movement became truly significant from the period around 1880 onwards. Considering the difficulties encountered in the procurement of reliable homeopathic remedies, the associations played an important role in the purchase of such products in the early years. The association dispensaries became the main supplier. For decades, this situation caused conflict, and led to the final prohibition of such dispensaries in the 20th century.

Biochemic therapy, developed by the Oldenburg doctor Wilhelm Schüssler from 1873 onwards as an offshoot of homeopathy, was also characterised by similar principles. This method was considered easy to learn and understand, particularly as the number of medicaments was limited to twelve, even eleven later on. The lack of physicians trained in Dr. Schüssler's biochemistry was felt to an even greater extent. Homeopathic pharmacies began producing biochemic drugs, the Tissue Remedies or Cell Salts, at a comparatively early stage. The number of lay biochemic associations increased significantly in the inter-war period. Associations also played a key role in the spread of this method of healing and in offering advice.

This work shows how widespread and popular the various preparations Hahnemann created were from the very beginning, even if homeopathy was always considered as an "outsider". In addition, the investigation presents new ideas for the analysis of historic self-medication and for further studies into the history of homeopathy. It became clear that individuals, be they physicians or lay homeopaths, thought a great deal about self-medication and dealt with the subject intensively. It would be wrong to suggest that a majority of people in the past overreached themselves with regard to their own handling of homeopathic remedies. Instead, people seemed to have had a basic

level of confidence in their own abilities as well as a good idea of when it was time to consult a physician.

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