

## Why Patients Choose Homeopathy

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*Interviews with 100 homeopathic patients in the San Francisco Bay Area show that for the most part the patients are young, white and well-educated, and have white-collar jobs; most had previously tried mainstream medical care and found it unsatisfactory. Among the reasons for their dissatisfaction were instances of negative side effects from medication, lack of nutritional or preventive medical counseling, and lack of health education. Experiences with conventional physicians were almost evenly divided: nearly half of the subjects reported poor experiences, slightly fewer reported good experiences. Three quarters of the patients suffered from chronic illness and about half considered their progress to be good under homeopathic care. The majority were simultaneously involved in other nontraditional health care activities.*

ONE BENEFICIARY of the current popularity of the holistic health movement is homeopathy, a system of medicine based on doctrines propounded by Dr. Samuel Hahnemann more than 175 years ago.<sup>1-3</sup> Homeopathy does not subscribe to the germ theory or to much of modern physiology or pharmacology. Instead, homeopathic practice is based on a set of idiosyncratic principles such as: the Law of Cure or *Similia Similibus Curenter* (remedies are most efficacious which produce symptoms most similar to the disease), and the doctrines of Minimum Dose and Drug Potentisation (preparations are diluted even past their vanishing point and "dynamized" by vigorous shaking). Other principles which are somewhat less at odds with mainstream medicine include the Doctrine of Vital Force (the body's natural power of healing) and the Doctrine of Individualisation (the peculiarities of each person make his or her illness unique).

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From the perspective of modern medicine, homeopathy represents a vestige of medical history which once may well have served as a useful restraint on doctors when their interventions were more likely to cause harm than good; today it clearly lies outside the mainstream of medicine, although an occasional interest has been manifest in academic circles.<sup>4-6</sup> It is particularly remarkable that in these times when the latest medical marvels form the daily fare of newspapers, magazines, television and the movies, this vestige of history seems to have become revitalized. Are those who choose homeopathy less sophisticated, less well-educated than the general population? Are they from a socioeconomic group that is excluded from mainstream medicine? Is the appeal of homeopathy based on a reawakened interest in its principles? Or is its popularity rather a reaction against negative experiences with conventional medical care?

This study was undertaken not as a critique of homeopathic care, but rather as an inquiry into

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its appeal. We hoped that information gathered from such a study might be of value to those within mainstream medicine who are trying to improve the effectiveness of their health care.

### Methods

A total of 100 patients were interviewed between December 3, 1976, and January 5, 1977, using a structured, open-ended questionnaire at three different homeopathic practices in the San Francisco Bay Area. The physicians in charge were all licensed MD's who had taken up homeopathy after completing their conventional medical training. The interview locations were chosen to provide a cross section of patients seeking homeopathy. A total of 30 people were interviewed in a small suburban practice, 30 in a large incorporated suburban practice and 40 at a large urban center practice. To exclude selection bias by the interviewer, each patient was contacted sequentially in the lobby or waiting room as soon as a previous interview had been completed. The subjects had no prior knowledge of the questions to be asked and no contact with other interviewed persons before their own interview. Interviews lasted 10 to 15 minutes. Ten subjects refused to participate, five pleading time constraints, and one subject stopped in the middle of an interview because of "feeling uncomfortable." Three children 12 years and younger were interviewed through their parents. As a further observation, timed observations were made on 45 patients in the different clinics to determine the physician-patient contact time for first visits and repeat visits.

Patients were asked first to provide basic demographic data such as age, sex, marital status, family size, occupation, race and level of education. They were then queried about their reasons for seeking homeopathic care. Questions covered such aspects as what the nature of their problem was, what led them to seek the particular clinic they were attending, what their past experiences with their illnesses and doctors had been, what goals they were seeking, whether the principles of the homeopathic clinic were important in their choice, what medical problems would lead them to recommend homeopathy or mainstream medicine, and what other forms of health care they were getting.

TABLE 1.—Selected Demographic Characteristics of Homeopathic Patients

	Homeopathic Patients	Comparison Population
Percent white . . . . .	96	89 <sup>7</sup>
Percent under 45 years of age . . . . .	75	60 <sup>7</sup>
Percent female . . . . .	66	61 <sup>7</sup>
Average number of children in family	1.5	1.2 <sup>8</sup>
Average years of education . . . . .	14.2	12.3 <sup>8</sup>

### Results

Data from the three homeopathic settings were tabulated separately and then tested for homogeneity. Except where stated below there were no statistically significant differences in the data obtained from the three sources. The results presented therefore are pooled from all three settings.

#### Demographic Data

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the study population compared with similar data obtained from other sources.

As a group the 100 homeopathic patients were young, single and white, and had a rather high educational level. A majority (57 percent) pursued white-collar occupations, 16 percent had blue-collar jobs, 16 percent were housewives and 11 percent were students. Of interest was the finding that a substantial percentage (11 percent) were themselves health care providers, including one MD, three RN's, three psychologists and four alternative form healers.

#### Medical Illness Data

Most visits (89 percent) were for symptomatic problems involving various organ systems. Well-care examination constituted 11 percent. In comparison, data from the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey of 1973 show that 63 percent of visits were for symptomatic problems and 6 percent for well-care. (The remainder, 31 percent, fell into other categories.<sup>7</sup>)

Most of the patients in this study suffered from chronic illness, 74 percent seeking care for conditions of longer than one year's duration and 34 percent for conditions that had lasted longer than five years. As an example, 15 of 18 patients with respiratory problems had chronic asthma.

#### Medical Care Data

Most (88 percent) of the homeopathic patients had previously consulted one or more conventional physicians for their condition, while 15

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percent were seeing such physicians concurrently. In the urban center practice, which had been in existence for ten years, 45 percent of the interviewed patients had been obtaining homeopathic care for longer than a year and 20 percent for longer than five years. In the large suburban practice (in operation four years) and the small suburban practice (one year), more than 90 percent of the patients had just begun to seek homeopathic care within the year.

The homeopathic physicians used homeopathic remedies alone in 63 percent of the patients, and in combination with conventional medication in 11 percent. In 8 percent of the patients only conventional medicines were being used and in 18 percent no medications whatsoever.

About half (47 percent) of the patients reported good progress with their illness, 22 percent poor progress and the remaining 31 percent had no opinion or felt it was too early to tell—of the last group, 3 percent were making their first visit.

Many (77 percent) of the patients were involved in some other form of nontraditional health care, most commonly chiropractic treatment, but also acupuncture, yoga, therapeutic massage, hypnotherapy, primalism, applied kinesiology, osteopathy, polarity, shiatsu massage and rolfing.

Homeopathic physicians spent an average of one hour with new patients and 20 minutes for return visits. In contrast, the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey of 1973 showed that in 75 percent of visits, physicians spent 15 minutes or less with their patients.<sup>7</sup>

**Reasons for Seeking Homeopathy**

Most subjects provided more than one explanation for seeking homeopathic care, some positively directed towards their expectations, others obviously in reaction to unhappy experiences with conventional medical care. Table 2 summarizes the responses related to previous experiences with conventional medical care in general. Table 3 summarizes responses related specifically to previous experiences with conventional physicians. Table 4 provides a summary of stated expectations of benefits to be gained from homeopathic care.

It is apparent that only a small number of patients (19 percent) claim that they were using homeopathy because it was consistent with belief or principle. A much larger number of patients (81 percent) described dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of conventional health care. Three

patients stated that they chose to go to homeopaths when their conventional physicians had recommended surgical operation.

Several questions in the interview were designed to probe attitudes with regard to the use of health care providers for specific medical situations. Although 78 percent of the subjects said that they would use or recommend conventional physicians for emergencies, acute illnesses and orthopedic problems, 16 percent said they would not recommend such physicians for any reason. To the question "What would you do if you had low back pain?", 35 percent said they would treat themselves, 27 percent said they would seek homeopathic care, 24 percent would seek a chiropractor and 20 percent would choose other mo-

TABLE 2.—Previous Experiences of 100 Homeopathic Patients With Conventional Medical Care

<i>Experiences Reported</i>	<i>Percent of Sample Holding Attitude</i>
Dissatisfied with one or more aspects of conventional care . . . . .	81
Belief that conventional treatment was failing . . . . .	55
Dissatisfaction with medication side effects . . . . .	55
Dissatisfaction resulting from lack of preventive medicine and nutritional orientation . . . . .	21
Dissatisfaction resulting from lack of health care education . . . . .	20

N = 100

TABLE 3.—Previous Experiences of 100 Homeopathic Patients With Conventional Physicians

<i>Experiences Reported</i>	<i>Percent of Sample Holding Attitude</i>
Poor experience with conventional physician . .	45
Good experience with conventional physician . .	40
Mixed experience with conventional physician . .	15

N = 100

TABLE 4.—Reasons for Seeking Homeopathic Treatment

<i>Reason Reported</i>	<i>Percent of Sample Reporting</i>
Seeking relief of problem without traditional medication . . . . .	83
Seeking improved health education . . . . .	33
Seeking improved health maintenance and disease prevention . . . . .	21
Seeking improved dietary consultation . . . . .	19
Treatment consistent with personal principles and beliefs . . . . .	19

N = 100

dalities such as physical therapy, massage or rolfing. Only four of the 100 interviewed subjects would choose conventional physicians to treat the disorder.

### Discussion

In an era when medical science has shown unprecedented diagnostic and therapeutic virtuosity, the popularity of an antique and mystical approach to health care such as homeopathy must seem puzzling. The phenomenon, however, seems to reflect a rising "disenchantment with modern science and a return to occultism."<sup>9</sup> At its center this movement focuses holistically on the person and reflects contemporary attitudes of psychology, sociology and politics. At its fringes, however, are a great array of alternative health care practices that derive from old, often exotic and apocryphal sources of authority which in general reject contemporary science and empiricism.

The patients seeking homeopathic care in this study certainly are not ignorant, unsophisticated or underprivileged, nor are they excluded from access to conventional medical care. Rather they seem to be "dissatisfied customers" who seek homeopathy in large part because of negative perceptions of and experiences with mainstream medicine. Most of these patients offer substantial challenges to medical care in that they have chronic problems lasting a year or longer. As could be expected these patients were not "cured" by their physicians. Nor were their physicians apparently able to satisfy them through continuing medical or emotional support, factors which ultimately diminished their effectiveness as health care providers. Whether homeopathy will do any better is uncertain, although this would be worth exploring—chiropractors, for example, have been found to be at least as effective as conventional physicians in treating low back pain.<sup>10</sup>

Although most of these patients were also involved in other nontraditional health care activities, it is possible that these providers—like homeopathic physicians—are not appealing to exotic desires, but rather to the contemporary, and by now conventional, wishes of patients to learn more about nutrition, prevention and self-care. Physicians trained in mainstream medical schools likely will fault much of the instruction

given such patients, but so far they seem to have provided little alternative.

A further examination of those factors, not perceived or expressed by patients, shows that homeopathic physicians spend more time with their patients than conventional physicians. Homeopathic physicians devote meticulous attention to each symptom, whatever the origin. Indeed an important element in the therapeutic relationships seems to be an agreement on the uniqueness of each person's symptoms. In contrast, conventional physicians seek to fit symptoms into common diagnostic patterns. Furthermore, in a large number of these patients, conventional physicians would tend to look for psychological explanations for both the symptoms and the benefits gained. Homeopathic physicians, however, rarely make psychiatric diagnosis as such, seeing such disorders as but a part of the "constitutional complex." This would appear to be very acceptable to these patients, only a small percentage of whom perceived their illness as being emotional in origin. It may well be that the patients prefer the homeopathic approach which avoids stigmatizing labels, and this as much as anything may account for much of homeopathy's appeal.

Finally, both patients and practitioners in the homeopathic offices showed some degree of flexibility—indeed shared responsibility—in application of principles. Eleven percent of the patients made use of both homeopathic and conventional medications. Indeed, homeopathic physicians tended to involve the patients in the choice of therapy, usually employing homeopathic methods first, then in the event that such treatment failed, instituting conventional therapy.

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