

The Pharmacists and Homeopathy

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ABSTRACT: Presented at the end of the end of the XVIIIth century by the German doctor Samuel Hahnemann as a form of complementary therapy, homeopathy has increasingly produced multiple controversies regarding the plausibility, effectiveness and safety of homeopathic remedies. Regardless, there are clients who require pharmacist's advice about their usage indications and effectiveness. As specialists in the field of medication, pharmacists must have basic notions about the principles on which homeopathic remedies have been based, given that it is the opposite of modern pharmacological theories. These describe in great detail the underlying mechanisms of action of the drug. Under these conditions, the ethical role of the pharmacist is to give accurate, impartial information regarding the homeopathic therapy, the current scientific proof on their therapeutic effects, including the placebo effect. This, doubled by a comprehensive, objective presentation of the options of medication-based treatment, guarantee pharmacists a clean reputation as competent authorities in the pharmaceutical field.

KEYWORDS: *pharmacists, homeopathy, remedies*

Introduction

Developed two hundred years ago as alternative medicine, homeopathy has three main principles at its foundation:

- similarity law-substances of animal, vegetal and mineral origin produce certain symptoms to the healthy subject to whom these have been administered; administered in submolecular doses as homeopathic remedies to a sick subject with similar symptoms, these substances had a curative effect;

- individualized treatment-the treatment is based on the symptoms the patient describes and must take into account that each personality and perception of the same symptom are unique;

- minimal dose law-infinitesimal doses of substances are used; not diluted these substances are toxic for the organism, whereas diluted, their effectiveness and potency increases directly with their dilution [1,2].

These basic principles of homeopathy are completely different from the scientific fundament of current modern medicine and have been thus considered implausible. Lacking a proven mechanism of action, they have been gradually rejected by the remarkable progress in medicine, pharmacy and chemistry in the last two hundred years; culminating with the decision taken in November 2009 by the Science and Technology Committee of Great Britain which declared that homeopathy "useless unethical and unreliable" [3,4].

Homeopathy should not be confused with other forms of complementary therapy such as herbal medicine based on herbal preparations[5], which, however, contain some active principles.

Homeopathic remedies compared with allopathic medicines

While classical allopathic medication are used for preventing, diagnosing or treating diseases, homeopathic remedies are dedicated solely to treating symptoms, without taking into consideration the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying that disease. For instance, the same homeopathic treatment is recommended in the case of vomit regardless of its cause, which can be chemotherapy, or motion sickness [6].

Before being put on the market, a medicine intended to cure a certain disease needs approval of superior institutions of drug control. To meet the high homologation standards, many years of research and much financial effort is required from the pharmaceutical companies. In cases in which the adverse effects are greater than the therapeutic benefits the certifications can be cancelled.

For the homeopathic remedies, there are no such regulations to keep under surveillance the therapeutic effects. Because the substances used have a high dilution, they are thought to lack a biological effect. Usually, clinical trials aimed at testing medication are randomized, double blind and compare the drug with a placebo, by these means evaluating objectively the therapeutic effectiveness and patient safety. How can these studies be compared with homeopathy?

Homeopathic remedies have only been tested in little clinical trials, but no explanation was found concerning the means by which these very diluted solutions, administered orally only, can act on a molecular level, nor has it been clarified

how it can interact with biologic tissue. Since there has not been a condition for which a positive or negative effect could be objectively proven, one could conclude that all the homeopathics are placebo [7,8].

Codes of ethics for pharmacists and the homeopathy

Being such a field of controversies, the pharmacist's attitude with regard to homeopathy is still a dilemma. Accordingly, we will analyze several aspects of the profession of pharmacist in respect of homeopathic remedies, formulated over time in codes of ethics and pharmaceutical deontology.

Thus, ever since 1848, Philadelphia College of Pharmacy recommends as a principle of good conduct that the pharmacist must not encourage the use of such products, nor promote their therapeutic effectiveness when they advise on the healing effect is sought. Later, American Pharmacists Association released a series of Codes of ethics and pharmaceutical deontology concerning alternative medicine and homeopathy.

The deontological code of 1852 disapproved of the unfaithful competition from the pharmaceuticals. The code of ethics for pharmacists of 1922 declared that the priority of the activity the pharmacists is the health and safety of the patients and not selling medicine and other types of remedies with the view of financial gain.

Presently, in 1952 the first clauses with respect to the health and safety of the patients, as well as the pharmacy's profit were issued, mentioning that the pharmacist must not support, nor get involved in promoting such medicinal products without possessing proper documentation of their therapeutic effectiveness.

The codes of 1969 and 1981 maintained an identical clause, which stated that pharmacists should not willingly tolerate promoting, distributing and selling remedies and alternative pharmaceutical products with not therapeutic effect, without meeting the pharmaceutical standards regulated by law. The latest Code of ethics for pharmacists issued in 1994 by the American Pharmacists Association made no reference in particular to empiric, homeopathic medicine or medication without proven pharmacological effect. However, it recommended that the pharmacist must keep his integrity by acting honestly, ethically and with conscience, accepting responsibility for his actions and under no circumstances providing false information to the patient [9].

Current ethics code in Northern Ireland calls for pharmacists to act with honesty, integrity and professionalism to maintain public confidence in their profession. In the specialty literature on professional ethics of pharmacists it is suggested that pharmacists should have professional dignity and act without the old-fashioned honesty. Why? Because honesty is really just confined to telling the truth when you are asked. But, quite frequently, applicants for homeopathic remedies rely on the fact that pharmacists are open and direct, and they offer voluntarily the information they want to know. But it is these information that are among the most difficult to understand for consumers.

So, not surprisingly, pharmacists are recommended by these codes to be honest with the public about the lack of evidence concerning the effectiveness of homeopathy.

Codes of professional ethics of pharmacists suggest that they are required to give consumers all the useful and relevant pharmacological information on any products bought from pharmacies.

Discussions

According to the codes of ethics, the pharmacists have a mandate to be trained on all types of drugs sold in pharmacies.

These codes urge pharmacists to act with professionalism and integrity and to not exploit the vulnerability or lack of knowledge of consumers; to provide accurate and impartial information to ensure that does not mislead or make statements which they cannot justify [9].

At the same time, supporters of homeopathy argue that the pharmacist must allow the consumer to purchase what they desire, accepting that homeopathic remedies can be useful as placebos, whilst biologically harmless, with no contraindications and adverse effects. On the other hand, medical experts describe homeopathy as a "fraud", (recommendation of products whose efficacy and safety is not supported by evidence) claiming that the pharmacist must notify the patient on what he is buying, and considering as unethical the recommendation of homeopathic remedies over classical medication, even if is for minor affections, and in this way delaying the medical consult [10,11].

While most pharmacists are aware of the recommendations of the codes of ethics, they sell homeopathic remedies for the following reasons [3, 10]:

A. Consumer demand, which directly requests a homeopathic preparation, considering it an effective form of alternative medicine, for which a prescription is not required. In light of this argument, the pharmacist no longer bears the sole responsibility of selling a product without therapeutic effect, especially if that person refuses proper advice.

B. The fact that homeopathic remedies are promoted through advertisements published in some magazines or mass media is seen by pharmacists as having a degree of legitimacy. But the emergence of these advertisements is due to financial sponsorship by homeopathic manufacturers.

Looking at all these issues, we hereby conclude that pharmacists selling homeopathic remedies are unethical, even if they provide adequate advice to the consumer. Sales of homeopathic products in pharmacies provide an implicit approval of homeopathy from the pharmacists. Some pharmacists consider homeopathic remedies as an alternative to conventional treatment.

Recently, World Human Organization prohibited the use of homeopathic remedies for severe conditions such as HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, severe diarrheic syndrome in children.

Until novel research supplies convincing clinical proof on the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies in certain diseases by comparison with the effectiveness of classic, conventional treatments, homeopathy should be a field of interest for pharmacists. Pharmacist practice requires it, given that providing patients with true, reliable data on medicine is a necessity. According to the codes of ethics for pharmacists, pharmacists must be trained so as to have knowledge of all types of medicine sold in pharmacies. The ethics of their profession enforces an appropriate counseling, which should be correct and impartial regardless of the feelings, beliefs and personal opinions on different subjects, such as homeopathy.

Conclusions

To successfully fulfill the demands of their profession towards the consumers requesting homeopathic remedies or information regarding their effectiveness, pharmacists must advise the clients on the possibility of choosing from a palette of classic, conventional drugs and inform

them that homeopathy is just a form of alternative therapy, different from plant based naturist cures, used only for minor symptoms and never for severe conditions. The current codes of ethics and deontology for pharmacist compel pharmacists to be competent in any field regarding medication. In the case of homeopathy, these codes emphasize that the pharmacist must counsel the patient concerning the controversial effectiveness of these remedies [12].

Knowing conceptual elements of homeopathy, the ethical role the pharmacist plays is to assist the patients in their decision on homeopathic remedies by providing pertinent information.

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