

Clarity, consistency, and legality needed:

Presenting the case for change

In this article I reply to some of the comments made in the last issue of *The Homeopath* and take the opportunity to expand on why I believe the Society's current statement on animal research needs substantial revision.

A new year brings with it the opportunity to reflect on the one that has ended, to review what went well and what did not, to consider what needs to be done and to plan how best to achieve it. For me 2015 saw two new projects started and another year of awareness-raising regarding the ethics of animal experimentation in homeopathy research. By December this included four presentations and three articles on the subject. The issue remains an important one: animal experimentation generates public and political concern worldwide and there is mounting pressure for action and reform.

The current debate

Like all homeopathic organisations in the UK, the Society of Homeopaths does not fund animal research so is not directly associated with

this work. We are currently debating, however, whether or not scientific papers describing animal experiments should be cited on our website and in leaflets and fliers – an action commonly seen as endorsing such work – although it is intended that only the least cruel experiments would be mentioned. The purpose of citing this research is to provide scientific proof that homeopathy 'works'.

Majority

The Society statement on animal experimentation currently advocates for such citations. At the Society AGM last March the great majority of attendees indicated that they would like to see this statement replaced with one that clearly rejects animal experimentation as a way of adding to the evidence base. According to the results of a mini poll conducted by the Society, however, 75 per cent of members are happy with the statement, which thus remains unchanged as of January 2016.

The statement

If 'none of us are in favour of animals being experimented on in the name of homeopathy' (see the Winter 2015 issue of *The Homeopath*), then one explanation for these wildly differing results must lie in the ambiguous wording of the statement itself and the way it has been interpreted. It will be helpful to look at each paragraph of the statement in turn.

'The Society does not condone or advocate the harming of animals used in research into homeopathic medicine.'

Fine at first glance. But in homeopathy research the 'animals used in research' are more often than not healthy laboratory animals which usually are harmed and killed - not naturally diseased domesticated or farm animals. The public's perception of animal research in homeopathy (as indeed that of most homeopaths unaware of the issue) would be that 'animals used in research' refers to the latter, and the current statement invites this interpretation.



by
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“Who gets to decide what is acceptable and what is not on a case-by-case basis and on behalf of the entire membership? The thin end of the wedge that comes with allowing some kinds of experiments to appear on the website and not others brings with it confusion.”

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Portrait of Dr. Samuel Hahnemann, Founder of Homeopathy Rare Books © Wikimedia Commons

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The potentised thyroxine experiments involving tadpoles lie at the mildest end of the methodological spectrum and most people consider that the animals were not 'harmed', apart from those, of course, that were killed to make thyroxine gland preparations. As this example clearly shows, then, the word 'harm' is open to interpretation.

Barren cages

Proponents of laboratory animal research might argue that housing animals in barren cages or subjecting them to frightening situations or intra-peritoneal injections or the repeated taking of blood samples or feeding via a gastric tube or depriving them of sleep etc does not involve undue harm. Who gets to decide what is acceptable and what is not on a case-by-case basis and on behalf of the entire membership? The thin end of the wedge that comes with allowing some kinds of experiments to appear on the website and not others brings with it confusion; better to remove the wedge altogether, i.e. not cite any laboratory-based animal research. This is my simple answer to the anticipated 'Where do we draw the line?' side-debate. The British Homeopathic Association (BHA) does not display the results of lab animal research on its site and the Alliance for Registered Homeopaths (ARH) has stated that it will not, so the Society would not be the first to take this progressive approach.

Unequivocal

Finally, it would be good to see some sense of conviction in a statement as important as this - at least equal to that shown for recycling at Society HQ (see the Ethics page on the Society website, the natural home for the animal research statement.) Good policy statements contain unequivocal, intention-based words ('against', 'promote' etc) not passive negatives ('does not condone or advocate'). They leave no-one in doubt.

'Where necessary The Society may use, discuss and disseminate animal-based research in communications and general work in such a way that respects the sensitivity of the membership on this issue.'

Censorship is not the same as taking a clear and unambiguous position on animal experimentation in homeopathy research. By cutting out the unpleasantness to respect members' sensitivities (aka ethical principles) we are sidestepping the deeper ethical issue. We are also failing to challenge the relevance of applying allopathic, reductionist thinking and methodology to the study of an energetic, holistic modality.

Reminder

As a reminder of what much of this work entails, here are three examples from 2015:

- Young male rats brain damaged by chemical injection then submitted to frightening memory trials to test *Lycopodium* (carried out in India);
- Mice placed on hot plates to investigate the pain-relieving properties of an unproved insect remedy (Turkey);
- Mice injected with brain and spinal cord material rendering them unable to walk or pass urine (a crude simulation of MS) then treated with homeopathically prepared substances (Spain).

These experiments are designed to cause suffering, that is precisely the point of this work, making the claim that 'researchers would never want the animals they use to suffer' hard to either understand or accept.

Numerous

It is fair to say that we are now well past the stage of proving that 'homeopathically prepared substances can have a biological effect greater than that of placebo'. Numerous *in vitro* and other studies have established this already. And why, exactly, are animal experiments deemed essential 'to understand how the vital force responds to a potentised solution'? Do plants not have vital forces? Leading researchers in Switzerland and Italy clearly think so. What about human volunteers, the traditional source of homeopathic knowledge? According to a legal expert there is nothing in the Declaration of Helsinki, which governs research involving humans, to prevent homeopathic medicines being tested on informed and consenting volunteers or patients as these medicines are not considered to present safety concerns. Alternatives exist, therefore, and there is a moral and legal imperative to use them.

Failed

Decades of lab animal experimentation and many hundreds of 'objective and rational' research papers describing this work have failed to gain us 'more acceptability by the medical community'; they have not bestowed the scientific credibility necessary 'to get a place at the table' and they have brought us no nearer to discovering mode of action. Hundreds more are unlikely to make any difference. What we see here is a fixed mind-set on both sides of the argument: one party blinded by prejudice to the potential of homeopathy, the other blinded by habit and research convention. In my view it will be the scientists who are currently taking novel and creative (and ethical) approaches to homeopathy research who will ultimately provide the answers we seek.

'The Society's policy is in line with European regulations which state that wherever possible, a scientifically satisfactory method or testing strategy not entailing the use of live animals shall be used.'

Insertion of Article 4 of EU Directive 2010/63/EU (the Animal Experiments Directive) may appear reassuring but is entirely inappropriate in the context of homeopathy research. The directive specifically requires two key tests to be met for experiments to obtain authorisation:

1. the alternatives test
2. the harm: benefit test

Alternatives

Both are pretty stringent and it is difficult to see how much of the animal research that is currently taking place could meet them. It is almost always possible to use alternatives, whether this is to show efficacy, effectiveness or to establish mode of action, and speaking as a practitioner of 13 years I have yet to see any benefit for my patients. Expecting non-consenting, non-human animals to suffer in an attempt to prove a point would not be considered lawful either. Please read the article written by an experienced lawyer (*Homeopathy in Practice*, Autumn 2015) if you are in any doubt.

Other considerations

I am not convinced that promoting ethically flawed research to the public 'will lead to more patients knocking at our doors', just as I'm not convinced that such work currently reassures the public that conventional drugs are safe and effective.

Drugs

The tragic results of a recent drugs trial in France - which has left one person dead and another five critically ill - underscores both the failings of animal experimentation as a scientific technique and the wisdom of mistrusting drugs that have been pronounced safe in this way. Furthermore, given evolving public perceptions of animal sentience it would seem to be a high risk strategy with the potential to backfire spectacularly. It also sends a counterproductive and confusing message about homeopathy itself: on the one hand we are trying hard to educate the public about its holistic nature, its individual approach to prescribing, the safety of its medicines and its 'do no harm' philosophy, while on the other we imply, through the promotion of animal experimentation, the reverse.

Inaction

It has been suggested that the numbers of animals involved are too small to be concerned about relative to those used worldwide in biomedical research, and that there are more important issues to worry about. Space does not allow me to address these comments, much as I would like to. My observation is that in the current context they have the effect of minimising the issue and encouraging inaction. They do little to move us closer to the goal of securing a strong and coherent ethical policy for

the largest registering body of homeopaths in Europe - the object of this debate.

Other organisations

In promoting homeopathy and those who practise it we should have the maturity and wisdom to consider our failings as well as our strengths and be prepared to raise our game on every level, not just in day-to-day practice. Last year saw welcome evidence of this when the profession as a whole began to re-examine the issue of animal experimentation in homeopathy.

The Faculty of Homeopathy, which has published the results of animal experiments for decades, is shortly to announce changes to its publication policy. I understand this will now require researchers to adhere to EU standards for ethical approval (i.e. Directive 2010/63), not simply local standards and guidelines - as has been the case until now. If properly enforced this requirement is likely to encourage a shift away from animal 'models' towards more scientifically relevant and ethical testing methods - and more high-quality, innovative research into homeopathy.

Raise bar

Similarly the Homeopathy Research Institute (HRI) - which has a policy of not funding animal research but which has provided a platform for it at both its conferences - is set to raise the ethical bar for the 2017 conference by giving closer scrutiny to animal research submissions. Like the Faculty it will also require such submissions to meet European standards. Since much of this work is unlawful under the EU directive it is fair to expect noticeable changes in content in future issues of *Homeopathy* and in future HRI conference programmes.

The BHA has had a policy since 2005 that 'emphatically does not fund any research that involves experiments on living animals' and supports instead high quality research projects involving consenting human volunteers as a way of adding to the evidence base. This policy unfortunately is not yet displayed on the BHA website.

The ARH rejects the use of lab animal research as a way of furthering our understanding of homeopathy but confirms its support of the responsible use of homeopathy on the farm. One homeopathy college is in the process of producing a statement that distances itself from any form of animal experimentation in homeopathy research.

In conclusion

It remains my sincere hope that 2016 will see the Society follow the lead taken by homeopathic organisations at the forefront of change, and that its members will finally be provided with a clear, well-constructed statement that reflects a progressive and consistent approach to research ethics.