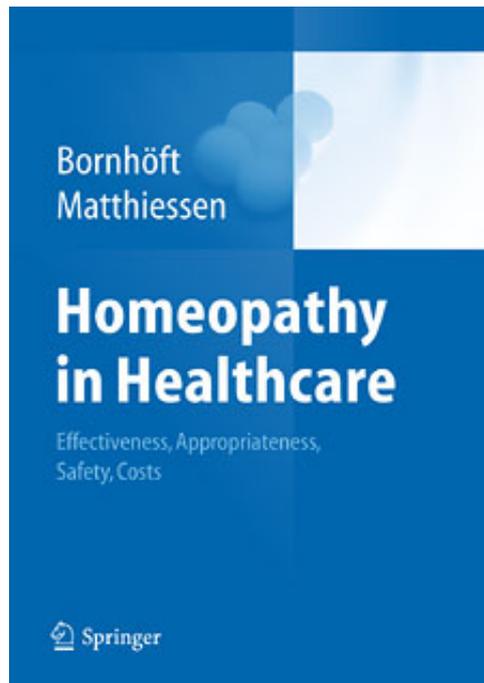


Bornhöft G. / Matthiessen P. Homeopathy in Healthcare

Reading excerpt

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11.1 Introduction

With regard to unexpected side effects (adverse drug effects) it is necessary to distinguish between the ones which are characteristic to homeopathy and even intended and the known pharmacological-toxic effects of (otherwise appropriate) medicines.

Homeopathic medicines are expertly manufactured according to international pharmacopoeias (HAB 2000). High potencies are administered at sufficiently long intervals (cf. Chap. 3). The application of toxic primary substances in low potencies, especially as part of complexes, must be well-researched and safety-checked. To what extent sensible recommendations are always strictly observed is not known.

Supporters of homeopathy continue to insist that it has no side effects; a claim that is not! unchallenged (see Oepen and Schaffrath 1993, p 265).

Toxic effects and adverse organ effects of drugs can almost be ruled out with expert prescription. They are different from the (typical) reactions which occur in (sensitive) individuals as part of homeopathic drug-proving or in ultra-sensitive patients during ordinary therapy as proving symptoms. Adverse reactions can be caused through incorrect application such as dosage repetition in too quick succession.

11.2 Responses to Treatment

An initial reaction at the functional level is possible following an individualized homeopathic prescription with high potencies even if it was given by a qualified practitioner. It can be strong enough to cause what is called 'initial aggravation' and can, in extreme cases, provoke the symptoms of a typical drug-proving. The return of old symptoms and skin reactions (which is in fact desirable) is seen as indicating an elimination process as described in Hering's Law of Cure. Frequency and severity of these reactions depend on various factors and do not constitute a problem with expertly delivered homeopathy.

If very low potencies are used unprofessionally, systemic toxic effects can occur (e.g. of arsenic, lead and mercury) similar to those known from pharmacology. The use of mother tinctures, which really belong to phytotherapy, can also result in topical or systemic symptoms of poisoning (Cardinal! et al. 2004).

An isopathy study mentioned up to 24% initial aggravations (Reilly et al. 1986) which were probably caused by too-frequent drug dosages. Specific adverse drug reactions which decreased with repeated administration occurred in an influenza prevention study in 10% of patients compared with 2% unspecific complaints for placebo (Attena et al. 1995).

If homeopathic substances are taken as standard combinations (complex homeopathy) or simultaneously ('proven indication, clinical homeopathy'), it is not possible to determine, and thus avoid, the component causing the adverse reaction.

Any homeopathic remedies, if incompetently applied by a qualified or lay person, can cause suppressions and adversely affect the course of the disease (cf. Chap. 3). Systematic assessment and confirmation of such findings are particularly difficult to achieve and have, to our knowledge not yet been published.

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11.3 Interaction of Substances

Some substances and medicines can inhibit, block or counteract homeopathic treatment (Sankaran 1984, Seider 1999). There is only anecdotal evidence of aggravating interactions (diphtheria serum, Hess 1942).

11.4 Safety of Application

The question of interactions of homeopathic treatment with allopathic medicines (hormones, antibiotics, cytostatics etc.) is frequently asked and can lead to a reluctance to prescribe these medicines. Homeopathic physicians carefully consider such situations and act in accordance with the general guidelines of medical responsibility. In practice it hardly ever happens that a homeopathic remedy has an adverse influence on the effect of allopathic drugs, while the effect of homeopathic treatment is clearly impaired by allopathic medicines.

11.5 Scientific Research

There are only few publications which demonstrate adverse effects, or unexpected adverse events (UAE), in general; a causal connection with the medication is not yet implied. A meta-analysis of 3437 patients from 24 placebo-controlled RCTs showed (only) 63 UAEs (1.54%) for patients treated with homeopathic remedies and 50 for placebo (1.45%). It concluded that there was no clear evidence of homeopathic initial aggravations (Grabia and Ernst 2003).

A summarising review was presented by Dantas and Rampes (2003), who found, on the basis of reports, an adverse event rate of 9.4% for homeopathic remedies as opposed to 6.1% with placebo, describing them as comparable, rare and transient. The authors deplore the low methodological quality of the publications.

The following investigations summarize single cases: Hentschel et al. (1998) reported that 63 (1.9%) of 3447 patients were treated homeopathically while in intensive care; 25 of them (39.7%), who had no pathological findings, thought their complaints were due to the homeopathic treatment. In nine of these cases conventional and homeopathic diagnosis and treatment were adequately documented. The authors recommend central registration as with conventional medicines.

IIPCOS (International Integrative Primary Care Outcomes Study) mentions a total of 8.3% of adverse events, which a third of the patients classified as 'strong'; half of these withdrew from the study and received therapeutic intervention. A causal connection with the investigational medication was assumed in only 3.4%. Intensity was rated 'medium' by half of these patients, and a quarter each described it as 'light' and 'severe', causing three patients to withdraw from the study and another three to seek other therapeutic measures (Heger et al. 2001). I GÜthlin et al. (2004) showed that physicians reported fewer UAEs than patients did and assumed that physicians and patients interpret initial reactions differently.

Dantas and Rampes (2003) explain anecdotal reports of adverse effects in conventional medical journals with products that were not genuine homeopathic remedies but were wrongly referred to as 'homeopathic'.

A systematic search for individual cases in the homeopathic and legal literature was not possible owing to problems of infrastructure, methodology and time.

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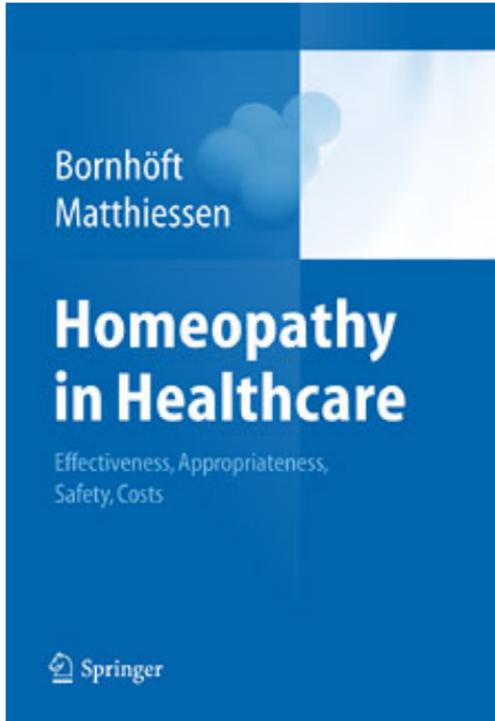
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11.6 Safety: Summary and Conclusion

Medical homeopathy in Switzerland has few side effects if professionally executed, and the use of medium and high potencies is free from toxic and unexpected organ effects.

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