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## Homeopathy is bunk, study says

Medical experts tested research and treatments for 68 conditions and found they had no impact

Helen Davidson, Tuesday 8 April 2014 15.00 BST

Homeopathy is no more effective than a placebo, according to an extensive study by a peak science body.

The draft paper by Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) assessed research into the effectiveness of the alternative medicine on 68 health conditions and concluded "there is no reliable evidence that homeopathy is effective".

Homeopathy claims to "let likes cure like," by using highly diluted forms of the ailment it is treating. The Australian Homeopathic Association states the practice treats patients as a "whole person, taking into account personality, lifestyle and hereditary factors as well as the history of the disease."

But the NHMRC review, conducted by a working committee of medical experts, said it had no impact on a range of conditions and illnesses including asthma, arthritis, sleep disturbances, cold and flu, chronic fatigue syndrome, eczema, cholera, burns, malaria and heroin addiction.

For the 68 conditions - including those listed - the review either concluded definitively that homeopathy was not more effective than a placebo, or at the very least there was no reliable evidence to suggest it was.

"No good-quality, well-designed studies with enough participants for a meaningful result reported either that homeopathy caused greater health improvements than a substance with no effect on the health condition (placebo), or that homeopathy caused health improvements equal to those of another treatment," read the report's summary.

Doctors welcomed the findings.

Professor John Dwyer, an immunologist and Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of New South Wales, told Guardian Australia that the report was long overdue.

"Obviously we understand the placebo effect. We know that many people have illnesses that are short lived by its very nature and their bodies will cure them, so it's very easy for people to fall in trap that because they did 'A', 'B' follows," he said.

Dwyer, who is also a co-founder of the scientific lobby group and watchdog Friends of Science in Medicine, said it was not ethical for people to prescribe a placebo and "fool people", and said homeopathic preparations should be "put away" once and for all.

He said the greatest danger in homeopathy was in its use as a vaccination.

"In my point of view as an immunologist, the most serious issue was the spreading of the concept that homeopathic vaccinations were harmless and just as good as orthodox vaccinations. People who believe that are not protecting themselves and their children," he said.

Homeopathic "vaccinations" are offered for standard diseases, as well as some that there are no medical vaccines for, said Dwyer.

"Homeopathic vaccines were being offered for HIV, TB, Malaria... none of them were effective," he said.

The Western Australia president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), Richard Choong, agreed and said the AMA has long held there is no evidence to support homeopathy.

"Homeopathy is not a science. It is not based in science," he told Guardian Australia.

"In a lot of cases it can be considered dangerous and can risk people's lives, and vaccination is a classic example of this," said Choong.

"Patients have been led to believe that they've been vaccinated in some way, using homeopathy, when there's no evidence to say they have been immunised against a disease which may cause harm to them if they were to catch it."

Both Choong and Dwyer called for the legitimisation of homeopathy to end, including the cessation of private medical insurance subsidies and the sale of homeopathic preparations in pharmacies. Both also criticised the teaching of the practise in tertiary education.

The report stated that "not all evidence is of equal value," dismissing anecdotal support for the effectiveness of homeopathy, and urged health professionals to be aware of the science and inform their patients.

"It is not possible to tell whether a health treatment is effective or not simply by considering individuals' experiences or healthcare practitioners' beliefs," said the report.

Submissions from homeopathy interest groups and the public were among the studies assessed by the NHMRC, but "did not alter the conclusions" of the Council, in some cases due to the poor quality of the studies submitted.