

## ORIGINAL PAPER

# What do homeopathic doctors think of vaccines? An international online survey



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**Background and objectives:** Parental refusal to vaccinate is a cause of serious concern. Use of homeopathy is believed to be a relevant reason for parents to refuse to vaccinate. However, vaccination is one of the main gaps dividing between medically qualified or not homeopathic practitioners. The present study sought to investigate the attitude of homeopathic doctors towards vaccination and associated variables.

**Methods:** An international online survey was conducted with homeopathic doctors by means of an anonymous self-reported questionnaire in Portuguese or Spanish. Questions investigated sociodemographic and professional characteristics, overall opinion on vaccination and on some specific vaccines.

**Results:** A total of 512 responses were obtained, 77.5% of respondents were from Latin American countries, 16.8% from Spain, with small numbers from several other countries. About 75.6% of the respondents considered vaccination safe, effective and necessary, while 12.5% stated they would not recommend vaccination under any circumstance. The variables significantly correlated with positive attitude towards vaccination were: working in the public health system ( $p = 0.04$ ) and homeopathy not the main medical activity ( $p = 0.005$ ). Homeopaths from Brazil, where homeopathy is officially accredited, were more favorable to vaccination compared to respondents from countries where homeopathy has inferior status ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** The results show that there is no contradiction between homeopathy and primary prevention by means of vaccination. *Homeopathy* (2016) 105, 180–185.

**Keywords:** Vaccination; Homeopathic physicians; Survey; Spanish; Portuguese

## Introduction

Parental refusal/hesitancy to vaccinate is currently a cause of serious concern.<sup>1</sup> Every once in a while the mass media report on parents who upon deciding to treat their children with homeopathy concomitantly refuse vaccination by default. More serious, on occasions like the outbreak of measles in California in 2015, countless voices are raised claiming that vaccines are not only ineffective, but also dangerous, among which many partisans of homeopathy. According to some studies, homeopathy is a relevant reason for parents to refuse to vaccinate their

children.<sup>2,3</sup> As a result many equate homeopathy with no vaccination.

To the public in general, including doctors, it is not clear that there is a large gap dividing between medically and non-medically qualified homeopaths. As a fact, practice of homeopathy by non-doctors is forbidden in several countries, including Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, France, Italy and Romania, and a large number of homeopathic practitioners are medically qualified in several others, most notably Germany and the United Kingdom.

One case in which the gap dividing between doctors and non-doctors is particularly patent is vaccination.<sup>4</sup> According to homeopathic doctors, only non-medically qualified practitioners have issues with vaccines,<sup>5</sup> while some studies showed that homeopathic doctors recommend vaccination correctly.<sup>6</sup> In Great Britain, the Faculty of Homeopathy recommends the use of conventional vaccines,<sup>7</sup> while associations of the more numerous lay homeopathic practitioners

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are against or have no specific policy in this regard.<sup>8</sup> This tense situation is so longstanding that as early as in 1990, Fisher, the chief editor of journal *Homeopathy*, published an editorial entitled “*Enough nonsense on immunization*”.<sup>9</sup>

Fisher’s call notwithstanding, non-medically qualified homeopaths still advocate strongly against vaccination,<sup>10</sup> and/or suggest replacing it with so-called ‘homeopathic vaccines’.<sup>11</sup> The fact that no such thing as ‘homeopathic vaccines’ exists has been strongly emphasized.<sup>12,13</sup> The polemic has risen to such level that recently, on May 2015, the Canadian Paediatric Society saw itself compelled to publish a position statement on this subject.<sup>14</sup>

To add to the debate, the founder of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843) did not only recommend vaccination, but the literature strongly suggests that he applied the smallpox vaccine to his patients by his own hand. His main concern in this regard was with the possibility that the lancets used could transmit other infectious diseases.<sup>15</sup>

To the best of our knowledge, one single study in Germany sought to assess the attitudes of homeopathic physicians towards vaccination 14 years ago.<sup>16</sup> To achieve a broader understanding of the current state of affairs, we conducted a survey to investigate the attitudes toward vaccination of medically qualified homeopaths from Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries to cover countries where homeopathic care is mostly, if not exclusively provided by doctors.

## Methods

An online questionnaire, with slightly different versions in Spanish and Portuguese, was made available on Google Forms from March 1 to June 30 2015 (Portuguese version – P) and from April 1 to June 30 2015 (Spanish version – S) to be anonymously responded by homeopathic physicians only. The questionnaires were advertised in mailing lists of homeopathic doctors, professional associations of homeopathic doctors, homeopathic schools for doctors and closed groups in social networks. The questionnaires contained 13 closed-ended questions and one field for optional additional comments. The closed-ended questions investigated demographic/professional characteristics (country of residence; length of experience in homeopathic practice; homeopathy as main medical activity; experience in homeopathy teaching; type of practice: children/adults, acute/chronic conditions) and attitudes toward vaccines (general beliefs on beneficial effects, efficacy and safety; vaccination official schedule; beliefs on frequency of common and severe adverse events; recommendations made to parents/patients; and mandatory status of vaccination). One additional closed-ended question in the Portuguese version concerned the work setting (public/private); Brazil is the only Portuguese/Spanish speaking country where homeopathic care is provided within the national health system. The present study was conducted within the context of a collaborative initiative with the National Board of Control of Immuno-preventable Diseases (DiNaCEI), Health Ministry, Argentina, which asked to add a question whether the respondents kept themselves up-to-date as to the epide-

miological status of preventable diseases and the changes in the latter incidence following vaccination. That question was included in the Spanish version only, as its final version was established after the Portuguese version was made available to respondents. The two versions of the questionnaire are included as [Supplementary materials](#).

The results were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics using software Microsoft Excel 2007<sup>®</sup> and described as absolute and relative frequencies. The results were analyzed by means of the chi-square or Fisher exact probability test at 5% significance level using tools available at statistical computation website VassarStats (<http://vassarstats.net>).

## Results

A total of 302 responses to the Spanish and 210 to the Portuguese version of the questionnaire were obtained. As there are no official data about the total number of actually practicing homeopathic doctors in Spanish-speaking countries, it was not possible to estimate the representativeness of the sample. Relative to the Portuguese version, it was responded by 207 homeopathic doctors from Brazil, and further 13 Brazilians responded the Spanish version. According to the last census conducted by the Brazilian Medical Association in 2013,<sup>17</sup> 2458 doctors self-declared to be accredited homeopaths, while the Brazilian Medical Homeopathic Association lists about 300 active members.<sup>18</sup>

All the respondents reported to be medically qualified homeopathic practitioners. They reside in 20 different countries, being that Brazil (n = 220; 43.0%), Argentina (n = 90; 17.6%), Spain (n = 86; 16.8%), Mexico (n = 48; 9.4%) and Colombia (n = 21; 4.1%) accounted for 90.9% of the respondents. The remainder of the participants (9.1%) was from the Americas (Uruguay, n = 6, 1.2%; United States, n = 4, 0.8%; Peru, n = 4, 0.8%; Venezuela, n = 4, 0.8%; Chile, n = 3, 0.6%; Costa Rica, n = 3, 0.6%, Paraguay, Cuba, Ecuador and El Salvador one respondent each, 0.2%). Only two respondents (0.4%) were from Portugal, there was one participant (0.2%) from India, Italy, the Netherlands and Romania each, and 13 (2.5%) did not answer this question.

About 46.1% (n = 236) of the sample reported to have taught homeopathy in (non-degree) graduate programs. About 44.9% of the participants (n = 230) had practiced homeopathy for more than 20 years, 28.9% (n = 148) for less than 10 and 26.2% (n = 134) for 10–20 years. Homeopathic practice was the main medical activity for 66.6% of the sample (n = 341). Most respondents reported to see adults and children (n = 322; 62.9%) for acute and chronic complaints (n = 297; 58.0%); 63 participants (12.3%) see children only and 114 (22.3%) adults only.

Among the 207 Brazilian doctors who responded the Portuguese version of the questionnaire, one-third (n = 71; 34.3%) provides homeopathic care at public health services full- or part-time, and 135 (65.2%) at their private practice only. Relative to the question introduced in the Spanish version of the questionnaire upon DiNaCEI

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