

## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Informing the homeopathic practice for Turkish pharmacists: reviewing the Portuguese community pharmacies example

Afonso Miguel Cavaco<sup>1,\*</sup>, Miray Arslan<sup>2</sup> and Sevgi Şar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lisbon University, Faculty of Pharmacy, Department of Social Pharmacy, Lisbon, Portugal

<sup>2</sup>Ankara University, Faculty of Pharmacy, Department of Pharmacy Management, Ankara, Turkey

**Introduction:** Alternative and complementary therapy systems, such as homeopathy, have long been used around the world. Since 1995 homeopathy has been officially recognized in Europe as a system of medicine or a medical specialty. Portuguese community pharmacists have long-standing experience with homeopathic products. By contrast, healthcare professionals in Turkey are less experienced with homeopathic practice although there is a new regulatory setting in place. There are a limited number of studies addressing pharmacists' role within the homeopathic system.

**Aim:** To investigate the attitudes (knowledge, feelings and behaviour) of experienced Portuguese pharmacy practitioners who deal with homeopathy, and thus to inform Turkish pharmacy practice and policy on homeopathy-related success factors.

**Methods:** A qualitative cross-sectional design was followed, using semi-structured and face-to-face individual interviews with purposively selected Portuguese pharmacists experienced with homeopathic medicines. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions imported into QSR NVivo v10 software for qualitative coding and analysis. Using a thematic content approach, the extracted codes were grouped and indexed by recurrent themes through a reflective procedure and constant comparison.

**Results & discussion:** Six general themes emerged, the most relevant being participants' feelings of gratitude for the ability to work in homeopathy; other themes were a helpful regulatory body, clear practice boundaries, scientific support and product quality assurance. Specialized homeopathic education was considered the most important factor for success. This was related to patients' positive perceptions and acceptance, suggesting an increase in public awareness through the pharmacy network.

**Conclusions:** Portuguese pharmacists' attitudes towards their homeopathic practices highlighted the key elements for success in a field that is usually distant from traditional pharmaceutical education and practice. The present findings provide guidance for Turkish pharmacists willing to expand their professional scope and to embrace complementary medicines. *Homeopathy* (2017) ■, 1–10.

**Keywords:** Homeopathy; Pharmacy practice; Portugal; Qualitative analysis; Turkey

\*Correspondence: Afonso Miguel Cavaco, University of Lisbon, Faculty of Pharmacy, Department of Social Pharmacy, Lisbon, Portugal.

E-mail: [acavaco@ff.ulisboa.pt](mailto:acavaco@ff.ulisboa.pt), [eczmirayarslan@gmail.com](mailto:eczmirayarslan@gmail.com), [sevgisar98@gmail.com](mailto:sevgisar98@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

Many alternative and complementary treatment systems have been used over the centuries all around the world. One of these is homeopathy, which is believed to help the body

to heal itself naturally by balancing the person's *vital force* through a holistic approach. The published literature, including World Health Organization (WHO) reports, refers to homeopathy as one of the most popular treatment systems in the world.<sup>1–5</sup> This unique alternative medicine system originated in Europe, and is officially recognized in Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Russia and the United Kingdom, as well as in Central and South America (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador and Mexico) and some Asian countries (India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).<sup>2,6</sup> Although it is increasingly used, there are legal regulations in only a few countries and regions, such as the European Union (EU), and these are mainly connected to the WHO documentation and guidelines.<sup>4,7</sup>

### Homeopathy in Europe

Homeopathy is particularly popular in Germany.<sup>8</sup> It is thought that physicians in Germany are more likely to believe in homeopathy than physicians in other countries, and an additional homeopathic qualification is also available.<sup>2,9</sup> Besides the regulation of production, quality and distribution under the German law,<sup>10</sup> strong support is given to homeopathic medicinal products by a specific Medicinal Products Act (*AMG-Arzneimittelgesetz*).<sup>6,11</sup> Legal recognition has also been given in the UK (in 1950), Romania (1981), Hungary (1997), Latvia (1997), Belgium (1999), Portugal (2003), Bulgaria (2005) and Slovenia (2007).<sup>2,8,12</sup> In Hungary and Latvia homeopathy can only be legally practised by medical doctors, but in Portugal the law does not exclude non-medical practitioners. In Portugal, there are educational standards, but these are more directed towards alternative medicines practitioners than to physicians, dentists or pharmacists.<sup>2,8,12</sup>

### The Portuguese example

Homeopathy in Portugal became visible from the mid-1990s, with an increase in alternative healthcare at a later stage.<sup>13</sup> This allowed for a stabilized legal framework, offered by the European Council Directives 2001/83/EC and 2004/27/EC. **Table 1** summarizes the Portuguese government's efforts to address public health concerns in relation to most alternative practices. Portugal is an interesting example of a marketplace where the regulation of homeopathy has a reasonably long history, and it thus serves as a good example to less experienced practitioners, such as Turkish pharmacists.

It is estimated that more than two million Portuguese people (approximately 20% of the population) regularly seek complementary and alternative treatments.<sup>20–23</sup> Out of 40,000 registered medicinal products at the national medicines agency (INFARMED), nearly 800 are homeopathic products. The Portuguese public national health system covers the costs of homeopathic medicines that are prepared on-site at pharmacies.<sup>2,8,12,24</sup>

### Homeopathy in Turkey

In Turkey, the extent of society's awareness and acceptance of homeopathy is not known, and pharmaceutical companies have shown limited interest in producing or marketing these products: there is no evidence of any homeopathic medicinal products being registered at the Turkish Ministry of Health.

It is only recently that these products have begun to be prescribed by physicians and dentists who are certified to have completed homeopathic training, as required by the Turkish Traditional and Complementary Medicine Act (of 27th October 2014).<sup>25</sup> Pharmacists have to comply with this regulation, which defines the scope of fifteen alternative therapies, as well as with the Turkish Pharmacy Law (No. 6308, from 2012), which allows homeopathic remedies to be dispensed in regular Turkish community pharmacies.<sup>2,3,26</sup> These are presently the only legal channel through which the public can acquire homeopathic remedies, although illegal Internet shopping and the importing of remedies from abroad by homeopaths continues to happen.

### Study aim

Homeopathic practice clearly differs between Portuguese and Turkish pharmacists, with a mature homeopathic market in Portugal, in contrast to Turkey. Acknowledging this difference, how might Portuguese pharmacists help with the sustained development of homeopathic pharmaceutical practice in Turkey?

The aim of this study was to investigate Portuguese pharmacists' attitudes towards pharmacy-based homeopathy. The results are expected to shed light on the aspects of pharmacy practice and policy that determine homeopathic success. The study was not intended to address any discussions related to the clinical aspects of homeopathy, but only to provide practice-based evidence and guidance to pharmacy practitioners in Turkey, or elsewhere, who wish to

**Table 1** Legislation on homeopathy in Portugal

Year	Legislation
1995	First law related to homeopathic medicines in Portugal (Decree No. 94/95 of 9th May), based on the requirements from the European Council Directive 92/73/EEC. <sup>14,15</sup>
2003	Homeopathy is recognized by the Portuguese law as one of six non-conventional therapeutic systems (homeopathy, acupuncture, naturopathy, phytotherapy, osteopathy, and chiropractic) (Law No. 45/2003, Article 3). <sup>16</sup>
2006	New homeopathic-related law (Decree-Law No. 176/2006 of 30th August), based on the requirements from the European Council Directive 2001/83/EC and Directive 2004/27/EC. <sup>17,18</sup>
2013	Portuguese Parliament adoption of the bill for regulating seven non-conventional therapies: homeopathy, acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine, naturopathy, herbal medicine, osteopathy, and chiropractic. The law came into force on 2nd September 2013 (Law No. 71/2013), replacing Law No. 45/2003. <sup>19</sup>

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