Complementary Therapies in Medicine (2013) 21, 115—120

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

SciVerse ScienceDirect

journal homepage: www.elsevierhealth.com/journals/ctim

Veterinary Clinical Research Database for Homeopathy: Placebo-controlled trials

J. Clausen[a,*], H. Albrecht[a], R.T. Mathie[b]

[a] Karl und Veronica Carstens-Stiftung, Am Deimelsberg 36, 45276 Essen, Germany
[b] British Homeopathic Association, 29 Park Street West, Luton, Bedfordshire LU1 3BE, UK
Available online 11 January 2013

KEYWORDS
Veterinary homeopathy;
Animal;
Database;
Review;
Placebo

Summary
Background: Veterinary homeopathy has led a somewhat shadowy existence since its first introduction. Only in the last three decades has the number of clinical trials increased considerably. This literature is generally not well perceived, which may be partly a consequence of the diffuse and somewhat inaccessible nature of some of the relevant research publications. The Veterinary Clinical Research Database for Homeopathy (VetCR) was launched in 2006 to provide information on existing clinical research in veterinary homeopathy and to facilitate the preparation of systematic reviews.
Objective: The aim of the present report is to provide an overview of this first database on clinical research in veterinary homeopathy, with a special focus on its content of placebo controlled clinical trials and summarising what is known about placebo effects in animals.
Results: In April 2012, the VetCR database contained 302 data records. Among these, 203 controlled trials were identified: 146 randomised and 57 non-randomised. In 97 of those 203 trials, the homeopathic medical intervention was compared to placebo.
Comment: A program of formal systematic reviews of peer-reviewed randomised controlled trials in veterinary homeopathy is now underway; detailed findings from the program's data extraction and appraisal approach, including the assessment of trial quality (risk of bias), will be reported in due course.

Introduction

Homeopathy was originally developed to treat human patients,[1] but already in 1815, the founder of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, stated that animals most probably would also benefit from homeopathic treatment (cited in[2]). Further early contributions were made, for example, by Genzke (provings in animals), Günther (handbook on veterinary homeopathy) and von Bönninghausen (various case reports) in the middle of the 19th century.[3–7]

Despite its promising start in the 19th century (for an overview see[8,9]), veterinary homeopathy has led a somewhat shadowy existence since these first contributions. Only in the last three decades has the number of clinical trials increased considerably. This literature is generally not well perceived, which may be partly a consequence of the diffuse and somewhat inaccessible nature of some of the relevant research publications. The Veterinary Clinical Research Database for Homeopathy (VetCR,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 201 563050; fax: +49 201 5630530.
E-mail address: info@Carstens-Stiftung.de (J. Clausen).

0965-2299/$ — see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2012.11.009

Table 1 Peer reviewed status of RCTs and NRCTs in veterinary homeopathy.

	# of records	# of trial records: placebo control	# of placebo controlled trial records in repeat publications	# of trial records: ''OTP''[a]	# of publications	Mean year of publication
Non-peer reviewed, non-randomised, controlled clinical trials	45	17	–	28	30	1994
Peer reviewed, non-randomised, controlled clinical trials	12	3	–	9	12	2005
(Sub totals of NRCTs)	(57)	(20)	–	(37)	(42)	(1997)
Non-peer reviewed, randomised, controlled clinical trials	92	47	10	45	78	1993
Peer reviewed, randomised, controlled clinical trials	54	30	3	24	48	1999
(Sub totals of RCTs)	(146)	(77)	(13)	(69)	(126)	(1995)
Sum	203	97[b]	13	106	168	
Δ (=unique placebo controlled trials)			84[c]			

[a] ''Other than placebo'' control.
[b] 17 of these trials include additional control groups besides the placebo group.
[c] See online Table 1.

http://www.carstens-stiftung.de/clinresvet/index.php) was launched in 2006 to provide information on existing clinical research in veterinary homeopathy and to facilitate the preparation of systematic reviews on the subject.[10]

Here we present an updated overview of the first database on clinical research in veterinary homeopathy with focus on its content of placebo-controlled clinical trials. We also summarise the knowledge on placebo effects in animals.

Materials and methods

Setup of database: Studies to be included in the VetCR database (http://www.carstens-stiftung.de/clinresvet/index.php) were identified by searching MEDLINE database (www.pubmed.org) and by analysing e-mail alerts of various journals with the keywords ''homeopathy'', ''homeopathic'', ''veterinary'' and ''clinical research''. Further publications were found by screening of dissertation abstracts, by citation tracking and hand-searching of complementary medicine journals. Besides observational studies and clinical trials, selected case reports and case series were included, but no basic research experiments were incorporated; the latter are the subject of the HomBRex database.[11]

For identification of controlled clinical trials in the VetCR database the search strategy was as follows: Design = ''randomised controlled clinical trial'' or ''controlled clinical trial''.

The peer review status of each relevant journal was identified by inspection of that journal's published information or its historical peer-review status was identified from The Serials Directory,[12] where its presence in the Peer Reviewed Index enabled its designation ''peer reviewed''. If no information on the peer reviewed status was available, journals were designated ''non-peer reviewed''. Books, abstracts, conference proceedings, theses/dissertations, newsletters, letters, reports and internet reports were automatically defined as ''non-peer reviewed''.

Results and discussion

In April 2012, the database contained 302 records. About half of the listed records were randomised, controlled clinical trials (RCTs: $n = 146$). In addition, 57 non-randomised, controlled clinical trials (NRCTs), 60 observational studies, 3 drug provings (or in modern terms, ''homeopathic pathogenetic trials''), 11 case series and 24 case reports were found. In one case, the study design was unknown (original publication not available). The 146 + 57 = 203 controlled trials are the subject of Table 1.

Each publication may contain multiple numbers of trials, resulting in more than one database record for the given publication. The 57 NRCTs were published in 42 different publications and the 146 RCTs in 126 different publications. The mean year of publication was 1997 and 1995 for NRCTs (peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed) and RCTs (peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed), respectively. Most of the listed publications ($n = 148$; 88%) were published in the last 30 years (Fig. 1), peaking between 2005 and 2009 ($n = 43$; 26%), irrespective of randomised ($n = 31$) or non-randomised design ($n = 12$).

Of the 57 NRCT records, 12 (21%) were published in peer reviewed journals (Table 1), whereas 37% ($n = 54$) of the 146 RCT records passed the process of peer review. Altogether, the number of non-peer reviewed publications was almost double the number of peer reviewed publications (108:60), but the proportion of peer reviewed publications (regardless of design) clearly increased in recent years (Fig. 2). The ratio of RCTs to NRCTs (roughly 3:1) has been rather stable in 5-year periods since 1975; there is no trend towards a higher percentage of RCTs (data not shown).