

ORIGINAL PAPER

The homeopathic choice for children: a qualitative research on the decision making process of the families



Elio Rossi^{1,*}, Marco Picchi¹, Mariella Di Stefano¹, Anna Maria Marongiu² and Patrizia Scarsini²

¹Homeopathic Clinic, Local Health Unit n. 2, Tuscan Regional Homeopathic Reference Centre, Italy

²U.O. Psychology, Local Health Unit n. 2, Italy

Aim: To explore the experiences of parents who chose homeopathic treatment for their children, with particular regard to the decision-making process within the family and the availability of conventional and homeopathic healthcare services.

Methods: Semi-structured interview with parents immediately after or before the homeopathic visit at the Homeopathic Clinic of Campo di Marte Hospital of Lucca (Italy) from 1st March, 2012 to 18 July 2012. Answers were analyzed by frequency of response and grouped into main areas: 1. Choice of homeopathy. 2. Intra-family dynamics. 3. Behaviour in emergency situations. 4. The relationship with the homeopathic doctor. 5. The role of friends and acquaintances. 6. The 'cut off' of use of homeopathy.

Results: Parents who choose homeopathic treatments for their children are strongly influenced by context. The choice of homeopathy is usually made by mothers and is rarely hindered by fathers, grandparents or friends, whose approval is important and encourages parents to use homeopathy for their children, both for prevention and treatment. Easy access to the homeopathic doctor was frequently requested, especially for acute situations.

Conclusion: This research confirms the importance of context in decision making processes. Other characteristics of families which use homeopathy, such as level of education, personal coping strategies and family context should be investigated. *Homeopathy* (2015) 104, 176–181.

Keywords: Patient choice; Children; Homeopathy; Decision making process; Conflicts between parents

Introduction

According to the last survey on health conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2005, in Italy 9.6% of children aged <14 years use CM (Complementary Medicines), of which 7.9% use homeopathy.¹ Many of the parents of children and teenagers who receive CM use CM for themselves (31% both, 64.4% one, usually the mother). A survey performed by the Health Regional

Agency (ARS) in Tuscany Region² in 2009 reported that 25.2% of pediatric patients under the age of 14 used CM. The most common was homeopathy used by 23.4% (acupuncture 0.5%; herbal medicine 1.3%).

Our research suggests that people who choose homeopathy have a relatively high level of education, prefer to participate in the management of their own health and have a lot of information at their disposal, both on conventional and unconventional medicine.³ These parents perceive consultation with a homeopath as being more appropriate than consultation with a conventional physician.⁴

However, with the exception of these data, very little information is available about the reasons that motivate families to choose homeopathic therapy, and about the social and family context that can promote or hinder their choice,

*Correspondence: Elio Rossi, Ambulatorio di omeopatia, Padiglione B, Ospedale Provinciale Campo di Marte, 55100 Lucca, Italy.

E-mail: omeopatia@usl2.toscana.it

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thus expanding or reducing the area of use of homeopathy for the families.

During our 16 years of homeopathic practice in a public clinic, parents have often told us about their difficulties in using homeopathic remedies. The reasons range from conflict with grandparents (who frequently take care of grandchildren full time and are often not sufficiently informed about CM) to the problem of getting in touch with the homeopathic doctor during an emergency or acute situations. As a consequence, parents have to manage the therapies alone and decide whether to use homeopathic or allopathic drugs, for example when the fever persists or a sore throat is too severe.

In the present work we investigated the most frequent problems of the families who choose the homeopathic approach for their children.

Aim

To explore the experiences of parents who chose homeopathic treatment for their children, with particular regard to the decision-making process within the family and the availability of conventional and homeopathic healthcare services.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews, about half an hour long, were conducted, with 20 open questions administered by a psychologist immediately after or before the homeopathic consultation; the parents of the children were asked to participate in a research concerning their opinions and experiences as CM users. Answers were recorded on audio tape and transcribed to an MS Word file. Field notes were taken on block notes, and each note was marked with the number of the case. The questions concerned demographic data, parents' decision to choose homeopathy, relatives and friends' reaction to the choice, children's pathologies, satisfaction with the results, ease of access to the homeopathic doctor, behaviour in case of serious diseases. Starting from the twenty answers provided for each question, we identified some main themes allowing us to study the most common experiences, cases, situations or opinions [Figure 1].

Sample

The sample was parents of 20 pediatric patients treated with homeopathy for at least six months at the Homeopathic Clinic of 'Campo di Marte' Hospital (Lucca, Tuscany) from 1st March to 18th July 2012. The sample was selected so as to cover a wide range of ages and diseases (Table 1). The inclusion criteria were: families of patients aged <14 years, followed at the hospital for at least six months. The children sampled were 9 females (mean age: 9 years) and 11 males (mean age: 8 years).

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted by a psychologist with specific training in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Qualitative analysis aimed to understand the reasons that led parents to choose homeopathy for their children and the most appropriate context for the homeopathic approach to diseases. As in the case of acupuncture,⁵ we hypothesized a 'path model' in which parents, like anyone involved in decision-making strategies for other people, make choices not only according to the outcomes but also to the changes that take place in a particular context. We collected responses concerning the history of the family and its internal dynamics, including grandparents' influence. We continued with the responses related to the relationship with the homeopathic doctor in connection to the use of homeopathy, and considered the importance of the broader context of friends and acquaintances.

The interviewees' records were analyzed in their manifest as well as latent content, taking into account the most commonly used words ('grandparents', 'health', 'prevention', 'friends', 'illness', 'mother's willingness', 'doctors'.....), trying not to lose the non-verbal expressions of uncertainty, doubt, and desire of the parents. We were interested in exploring how people behaved in their social reality and the interviewer (a psychologist) did not interfere with any expressions of feeling or opinion. We had also provided for the interpretation of any outlying cases, but no such intervention was necessary.

Informed consent and ethical approval

All patients were asked to sign a privacy disclaimer and an informed consent form for the use of their data and their answers for future research. There are no rules or laws in Italy that recommend to obtain ethical approval when no drugs are administered. However, authorization was asked to the person responsible for the clinical structure in which the Homeopathic Clinic is located.

Results

The use of open questions allows researchers to collect information that could otherwise be lost when using closed questions. However, the information collected was heterogeneous and difficult to analyze and synthesize. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results, we grouped parents' answers into five main components (each composed of three or more items). We added a sixth, general component, which helped synthesize the relationship between the environmental context in which parents choose to comply to the homeopathic approach and the various situations in which the homeopathic remedies are used.

Components

1 **Choice of homeopathy** "My children have never taken antibiotics!" (SB.'s mother)

Item 1: "Who are your family members?"

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