

## HISTORICAL

# Hahnemann and placebo



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**Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843) known today as the founder of homeopathy, was – as far as we know – the first physician who administered placebos to his patient on a systematic and regular basis. This study is based upon unpublished documents (e.g. patients' letters) in the Archives of the Institute for the History of Medicine of the Robert Bosch Foundation in Stuttgart. It also profited from the critical edition of Hahnemann's case journals and the editorial comments which have also been published in this series. Hahnemann differentiated clearly between homeopathic drugs and pharmaceutical substances which he considered as sham medicine (e.g. milk sugar). A close look at Hahnemann's case journals reveals that the percentage of placebo prescriptions was very high (between 54 and 85 percent). In most instances Hahnemann marked placebos with the paragraph symbol (§).**

**The rationale behind this practice was that Hahnemann had encountered the well-known problem that patients were used to taking medicine on a daily basis as it was typical for the age of heroic medicine. The main reason for giving placebo was therefore to please the impatient patient who was used to frequent medications in allopathic medicine, not only every day but sometimes also hourly. Homeopathy (2014) 103, 208–212.**

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## How the term placebo entered the medical sphere

The term 'placebo' has not been part of medical usage for very long, but the phenomenon we refer to as the 'placebo effect' has been known in medical as well as lay circles for a long time.<sup>1,2</sup> It was not until the second third of the 18th century that the phenomenon, or at least a partial aspect of it, was first referred to as 'placebo'. In this period the term 'placebo' became part of medical jargon. In contrast to the prevailing opinion that it was the Scottish physician William Cullen (1710–1790) who introduced this expression into medical language in 1772, the credit must be given to another English-speaking physician, Alexander Sutherland (born before 1730-died after 1773) of whom we hardly have any biographical information.<sup>3</sup> But it was Cullen, one of the most influential profes-

sors at the Edinburgh Medical School, who disseminated this term in British medical circles. In 1772/3 he used for the first time the word 'placebo' in his popular clinical lectures. He referred to a patient to whom he gave an external application of mustard powder although he was not convinced of its specific effect: "I own that I did not trust much to it, but I gave it because it is necessary to give a medicine, and as what I call a placebo. If I had thought of any internal medicine it would have been a dose of the Dover's powders."<sup>4</sup> In another case which he also considered to be hopeless he prescribed a kind of palliative medicine that was ineffective in his view. He justified his ethically doubtful decision as follows: "I prescribed therefore in pure placebo, but I make it a rule even in employing placebos to give what would have a tendency to be of use to the patient."<sup>5</sup> (Cullen, 1772).

Cullen's 'placebo' was, however, not an inert substance. He tended to use low doses of drugs (a kind of pseudo-placebo) which he thought to be ineffective given the severity of the disease. His main concern was not what to prescribe but how to fulfil the patient's desire for a remedy even though he did not personally believe in its pharmacological effectiveness (according to the state of knowledge at the time).

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## Hahnemann and placebo

Thirty years later, a German doctor by the name of Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843) known today as the founder of homoeopathy, was – as far as we know – the first physician who administered placebos to his patient on a systematic and regular basis. Although his rather idiosyncratic translation of Cullen's *Materia Medica* into German triggered the famous experiment with Peruvian bark (which actually started his work on a new art of healing, later labelled homoeopathy), Hahnemann was obviously not familiar with the *Clinical Lectures* by the same author. For this reason he did not come across the term 'placebo' used by the famous Scottish professor. But there can be no doubt – as we shall see later on – that Hahnemann knew the underlying principle, i.e. giving 'something non-medicinal' to an anxious patient expecting at least some kind of treatment.

## Methods

Hahnemann's medical case journals starting in 1801 and ending in 1843 are a unique source for studying Hahnemann's medical practice. Parts of this unique treasure have been published in recent years. Some volumes of this edition have been studied in depth by homoeopaths and medical historians, revealing an 'unknown' Hahnemann, always willing to experiment for the benefit of his patients. The following analysis is based upon unpublished documents (e.g. patients' letters) in the Archives of the Institute for the History of Medicine of the Robert Bosch Foundation in Stuttgart. It also profited from the critical edition of Hahnemann's case journals and the editorial comments which have also been published in this series.

## The important role of placebo in Hahnemann's practice

Many people still believe that homoeopathy is a placebo. For them it must come as a surprise that Hahnemann unlike most of his contemporaries was already familiar with a phenomenon which we call today placebo effect. First, he differentiated clearly between homeopathic drugs administered in line with the law of similars and such pharmaceutical substances he considered quite rightly as sham medicine (e.g. milk sugar). Second, as far as we know, he was the first physician who systematically used a single blinded approach in therapy. This means that the patients were kept in the dark about the identity of the drugs.

A close look at Hahnemann's case journals reveals that the percentage for placebo prescriptions is very high. In his case journal no. 22 from 1821 85% of the medications are placebo.<sup>6</sup> This is also true in regard to his later years. In the period between 1833 and 1835 more than half (54%) of Hahnemann's prescriptions are placebo.<sup>7</sup> The few medico-historical studies on individual patients treated by Hahnemann, e.g. the father of the famous German musician Clara Schumann, Friedrich Wieck, also reveal that up to a quarter

of the drugs administered to this patient were non-medicinal.<sup>8</sup>

## Hahnemann's forms of placebo

In his case journals covering the period from 1801 to 1843 Hahnemann usually marked placebos with the paragraph symbol (§) (for example: D 38, 172, line 19). This sign might have been imbued by the abbreviation for sugar in pharmaceutical literature which is 'ff'. A single placebo powder weighed 0.12–0.18 g. These powders were administered by handing out to the patient small wrappers or envelopes which had no labels and were merely numbered. "If the patient should wish to take medicine every day the homoeopathic physician may give him every day a dose of sugar of milk of about three grains, all these powders being marked with successive numbers".<sup>9</sup> The patient therefore did not know which of these contained homeopathic drugs and which just lactose. Hahnemann even thought about a system in which concealment could be achieved by sending a patient to a local pharmacy where the apothecary dispensed homeopathic drugs and placebos without being able to differentiate between the two in order not to influence the patient.<sup>6</sup>

Another sign for placebo is a small zero (o) below the line (for example: D 38, 41, line 32), indicating that Hahnemann gave the patient a non-medicinal globulus. In some cases he dispensed with a special sign for placebo. Instead he used an apothecaries' weight (ounces) preceded by numerals. This combination also indicates that the patient received a placebo.

After first experimenting with ground oyster shells (*conchae*) as placebo at the beginning of his homoeopathic practice, Hahnemann later on almost exclusively gave lactose in these cases to which the homoeopathic *Materia Medica* (and modern pharmacology too!) does not attribute a medicinal effect. However, till the mid-1820s, Hahnemann continued to give *conchae* which later (1828) became part of the *Materia Medica* (*calcareo carbonica*) as placebo, especially to children.<sup>6</sup> The 4-year-old daughter of a coachman, for example, received 1822 eight *conchae* as placebo (Case journal D 22, 412, line 29).

In a footnote to the first edition of his work on *Chronic Diseases* which appeared in 1828 (first English translation in 1845), Hahnemann explained why he had finally chosen milk sugar as his favourite placebo:

"There are hypercritical homoeopathic physicians who were afraid that even the sugar of milk might obtain medicinal qualities from being long kept in a bottle, or from long trituration. Long-continued experiments have convinced me that this apprehension is unfounded. Both the raw and the prepared sugar of milk may be taken as nourishment in considerable quantity without the least disagreeable symptoms being experienced from it. Fears have also been entertained that, in triturating the medicinal substance in a porcelain mortar, particles might become detached from this latter, and that the triturating process might change them to powerfully active silicea. To ascertain whether such fears were founded, I caused one

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