

ORIGINAL PAPER

New approaches within the history and theory of medicine and their relevance for homeopathy[☆]



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Conventional sciences have brought forth a wealth of knowledge and benefits, but they have not always been clear and precise about their legitimate scope and methodological limitations. In contrast, new and critical approaches in modern sciences question and reflect their own presuppositions, dependencies, and constraints. Examples are quantum physics, theory and history of science, as well as theory and history of medicine, sociology, and economics. In this way, deprecative dogmatism and animosity amongst sciences ought to be lessened, while the field opens up for each science to redefine its appropriate place in society. This would appear to be a chance for homeopathy, as new approaches, especially within the social and economic sciences, suggest that being a follower of Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843) may have advantages and privileges that conventional medicine seems to be lacking and whose relevance was overlooked during the rise of economic thinking in the last two centuries. *Homeopathy* (2014) 103, 153–159.

Keywords: History of medicine; Theory of medicine; Homeopathy; Samuel Hahnemann; Social sciences; History of Economics

Introduction

Basic research in medicine is commonly associated with laboratory, clinical, and epidemiological studies undertaken by highly specialised natural scientists. However, under the postmodern conditions of late capitalist societies, the assessment and development of medicine is no longer reserved to medical experts alone. Instead, a multitude of actors, from lawyers and politicians to economists and traders, are shaping the future of medicine. Accordingly, besides the natural sciences, the humanities are increasingly gaining relevance to observe and eventually supervise the many changes to which medicine is subjected at present. To be sure, within the social sciences basic research is also necessary and, in fact, under way. Against the background of relativism of values and crisis of author-

ity, today every science permanently has to question and reassure its own basis, scope, and destination. Generally, a high level of dynamics in any field may signify problems, but also good prospects – for those who know how to profit from them. In particular, within the currently changing scientific landscape, homeopathy is being challenged to find and redefine its appropriate place – potentially with the help of new approaches within the history and theory of medicine.

Since its founding by Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843) some two hundred years ago, homeopathy has accomplished impressive achievements. Examples being the curing of countless diseases, individually as well as in epidemics,¹ popularity among millions of patients all over the world, political successes, professionalisation and institutionalisation,² and scientific research, from case studies and clinical trials to basic laboratory research.³ Nevertheless, recognition and full appreciation by conventional medicine is still lacking.

How can this paradox be explained, how can it be resolved? The thesis suggested in the following is that conventional medicine's rejection of homeopathy's claim of being a scientific medicine stems mainly from an inaccurate understanding of the scope, task, and limits of

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[☆]Revised version of a paper presented at the 66th Congress of the Liga Medicorum Homoeopathica Internationalis in New Delhi, India, on 3 December 2011.

Received 22 October 2012; revised 26 July 2013; accepted 27 August 2013

sciences, and their appropriate status in our lives. On the other hand, if we actually take all sciences as tools for cognition and practice, rather than as authorities forcing us to subdue ourselves under their implicit reductionist world-view, and if we apply their critical approach to themselves, to their specific methodology and limited horizon, up to the point that they reveal their own presuppositions and restricted validity, we may regain a fresh and uncaged look upon reality.

Theory of medicine

Starting with the most certain and least disputed fact among homeopaths: Homeopaths are practicing homeopathy, are they not? But what does this mean, what are they actually doing? Is a simple, general answer possible at all — or is any answer dependent on theory?

The usual assessment given by *conventional medicine*, the science closest to and yet most uncomprehending of homeopathy, reads approximately as such: Homeopaths are not using material medical substances, but ultramolecular dilutions. They do not prescribe according to conventional diagnoses based on objectifying technologies, but according to subjective complaints and idiosyncrasies. And instead of trying to remove material causes of diseases, they treat according to the principle of similars, which would not be considered scientific. Since clinical trials conforming with the gold standards of evidence based medicine, such as randomised double-blind studies, generally are said to not show a significant difference between homeopathic and placebo treatment, conventional medicine quickly concludes that homeopaths are practicing placebo therapy.

This statement, however, cannot be considered to be scientific — as long as it does not mention its own presuppositions and limiting framework. Correctly stated it should read: Under the premise of a naive materialism and the quantitative statistical method, neither homeopathy nor placebo therapy may adequately be assessed and understood, because they may possibly be phenomena escaping the conventional set of scientific categories.

A rebuke of ungrounded claims and pretensions by conventional medicine, however, should not be misunderstood as a rejection of the modern scientific method at large. The method of systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses, as it is successfully performed in physics, chemistry, as well as in conventional medicine, proves to be very efficient and nobody likes to abandon their achievements.^{4,5} The simple, but crucial problem is that these positives become undermined by a dark and threatening side for humanity, when its instrumental function is forgotten and the whole world, including our lives, would be considered to be nothing more than what scientists are capable measuring and outlining on their tables.⁶

In *quantum physics*, one of the most sophisticated and consistent branches of natural sciences, the scientific approach has long ago arrived at the point where the basic assumptions of conventional sciences, their simple realism, objectivism, and materialism, have proved to be untenable.

Instead of still hoping to find out whether “reality” essentially consists of particles or waves, scientists can show that the act of measurement, rather than detecting allegedly objective entities, leads to a collapse of the system as a whole and constitutes and fixes nothing but a man-made image of the world. If the scientist asks nature questions appertaining to particles, she provides him/her with particle data, if he/she asks questions regarding waves, her wave responses will induce him/her to create a wave-based view of the world, etc.⁷

The same scientific insight, relativising conventional science and putting it in its proper place, can be found in modern *biology*, in the form of radical constructivism. Perception is here no longer deemed a passive reception of data coming to us through the senses from an allegedly objective world outside, but rather a reconstruction process run by the subject, depending on his/her disposition, interest, history, etc. Accordingly, dogmatic concepts, such as truth, reality, or objectivity, are replaced by the pragmatic criterion of viability, i.e. the test whether an idea or conception actually works in practice or not.^{8,9}

Modern *theory of science* addresses these issues in a more general but equally uncompromising way. While positivism, critical rationalism, and general constraints of methodology have been effectively refuted,¹⁰ in *mathematics* the establishment of the incompleteness theorem demonstrated the inherent limitation of all axiomatic systems.¹¹ Within *philosophical logic* it could be shown that any science rests on presuppositions that cannot rationally be derived from itself.¹² Pioneered by the elaboration of “thought styles” and “thought collectives” underlying any so-called scientific fact,¹³ in *epistemology* today it is widely accepted that science is basically a social process, operating successfully within the scope of certain paradigms. These, however, have no absolute validity but can be and in fact have been revolutionarily changed from time to time, as may be shown by the *history of science*.¹⁴

Theory of medicine, inspired by these insights, has emerged as a discipline on its own right and developed significantly during the second half of the twentieth century. Contrary to the conventional assessment of medicine as nothing but an applied natural science, it has now become accepted that medicine has to be considered a practical science *sui generis* — corresponding to the traditional concept of the art of healing. Since medicine is primarily constituted around the assignment of the physician to help the patient, i.e. around the doctor’s duty to act or to give advice, acquisition of knowledge may never be a detached goal in itself, but has only a secondary status, as a means to facilitate the primary aim of beneficent action.¹⁵

Apart from the clarification of its current status, modern theory of medicine has also developed concrete models to broaden its approach to, and the comprehension of, its genuine object, the human being. To that end the suggestion has been made to introduce the concept of subjectivity, i.e. the human subject, into medicine.¹⁶ Along these new lines of thinking, the biopsychosocial model of the human being was expounded as a possibility to perceive and to treat the patient as a unity of physiological, mental, and

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