

CONFERENCE REPORT

Cutting Edge Research in Homeopathy: HRI's second international research conference in Rome

Rome, 3rd–5th June 2015, was the setting for the Homeopathy Research Institute's (HRI) second conference with the theme 'Cutting Edge Research in Homeopathy'. Attended by over 250 delegates from 39 countries, this event provided an intense two and a half day programme of presentations and a forum for the sharing of ideas and the creation of international scientific collaborations. With 35 oral presentations from leaders in the field, the scientific calibre of the programme was high and the content diverse. This report summarises the key themes underpinning the cutting edge data presented by the speakers, including six key-note presentations, covering advancements in both basic and clinical research. Given the clear commitment of the global homeopathic community to high quality research, the resounding success of both Barcelona 2013 and Rome 2015 HRI conferences, and the dedicated support of colleagues, the HRI moves confidently forward towards the next biennial conference.

Keywords: Homeopathy research; Basic research; Laboratory models; Plant models; Clinical trials; Meta-analysis; Conference; Public health challenges; HRI

Introduction

The city of Rome provided a suitably vibrant backdrop for the second international research conference hosted by the Homeopathy Research Institute (HRI), held on 3rd–5th June 2015. This highly successful event followed the same theme as HRI's inaugural conference held two years previously in Barcelona: 'Cutting Edge Research in Homeopathy'. These HRI conferences have provided a unique experience within the worldwide homeopathic conference calendar – a two and a half day international event dedicated solely to homeopathy research, providing a forum for the sharing of ideas and the creation of international scientific collaborations.

The HRI Rome 2015 conference sold out weeks in advance, seeing over 250 delegates come together to hear presentations made by 35 speakers (including 6 professors and 28 doctors (MD/PhD)) from 17 countries. Presentations were selected from 116 abstract submissions to create a programme which included 6 keynote addresses (*Bellavite; von Ammon; Dinelli; Marques de Araujo; Jacobs; Mathie*) and 35 poster presentations. The intense programme was packed with the highest calibre of science delivered by respected and well-established researchers in fundamental, basic and clinical research as well as provings/pathogenetic trials.

The packed house in Rome was a clear demonstration that there is now an established interest in and commitment to, high quality research across all branches of the homeo-

pathic community. The HRI Conference was supported and attended by international representatives from every sector of the profession, including the European Committee for Homeopathy (ECH) and Liga Medicorum Homeopathica Internationalis (LMHI), European Central Council of Homeopaths (ECCH), European Coalition on Homeopathic & Anthroposophic Medicinal Products (ECHAMP) (representing homeopathic manufacturers and pharmacies) and the Central Council for Research in Homeopathy, India (CCRH). In total 39 countries were represented by academics, researchers, homeopaths and individual homeopathic companies, including substantial delegations of students.

The conference also saw a pre-conference workshop on 'Harmonised proving guidelines of ECH & LMHI'; a topic that continued into a parallel session on the second day exploring the practicalities of performing provings, extracting information from provings (*Ross; Smith; Jansen; Renoux*) as well as the challenges and processes involved in gaining ethical approval for provings (*Gray; Duckworth*).

Opening ceremony and keynote address

An inspiring letter from the Italian Minister of Health, The Honourable Beatrice Lorenzin, read by Dr Francesco Marino (vice-president of the Italian Federation of Homeopathic Associations and Homeopaths (FIAMO)) was a

particular highlight of the opening ceremony. L'On. Lorenzin reminded delegates of the importance of the HRI conference, not just as a showcase for homeopathy research, but also as a vital contribution to the fundamental right of every citizen to have “*access to the most effective and appropriate treatments for one's pathology*”.

The conference programme itself was opened by keynote speaker Prof Paolo Bellavite (Italy), a well-established and highly published researcher into laboratory-based models of remedy bioactivity. Prof Bellavite described the existing body of evidence in high dilution research using a range of experimental models (some dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries), highlighting both the central importance as well as the challenges posed by basic research: a theme that was to be reiterated throughout the conference. Prof Bellavite then summarised experiments performed by his team investigating the biological effects of potentised *Gelsemium*, using both murine behavioural models to assess its anxiolytic potential¹ and cellular and molecular approaches to explore the possible mode of action. In particular, the striking results of the most recently published microarray gene expression study of the effects of *Gelsemium* on neurocytes cultured *in vitro* were presented.²

A key message from Prof Bellavite's presentation set the scene for the talks scheduled in the coming programme. That is, even though the body of clinical evidence for homeopathy grows in size and strength, its wider acceptance is hindered by arguments of placebo and implausibility. This prompted a timely reminder of the conclusion by Kleijnen *et al.* in their meta-analysis of homeopathy from 1991: “*Based on this evidence we would be ready to accept that homeopathy can be efficacious, if only the mechanism of action were more plausible*”.³ This quote also created an interesting symmetry with Dr Robert Mathie's (UK) closing keynote address on his recent meta-analysis of trials involving individualised homeopathic treatment versus placebo which found homeopathic medicines to have specific beneficial effects (see below).

Homeopathy remains a controversial subject enjoying little acceptance from the wider scientific community, yet its rising popularity with the public continues unabated. While Prof Bellavite showcased the body of evidence currently available in homeopathic basic research, essentially ‘putting an end to the placebo argument’, this left the perennial problem of plausibility unaddressed. It was clear that the two main arms of homeopathy research (clinical and basic) must continue to work synergistically to create a credible position for homeopathy before the profession can gain wider acceptance and ultimately provide potential solutions for some of the main public health issues facing mankind today (Figure 1). The talks and posters presented during the remainder of the conference echoed this synergy.

The opening session concluded with the second keynote address, given by Dr Klaus von Ammon (Switzerland). Dr von Ammon began the clinical presentations by exploring some of the more challenging/unconventional phenomena

seen in practice. Dr von Ammon synthesised these collected experiences and observations into a proposal for a structured programme of research. This proposal reminded delegates that there is still much to explore within homeopathy and the boundaries of the current hypotheses regarding mechanism of action of homeopathic medicines may also need to take additional non-material effects into consideration.

Clinical research

Following on from Dr von Ammon's presentation, a significant number of clinical research presentations explored the effects, or potential role of homeopathy in treating both communicable and non-communicable diseases: communicable diseases included Upper Respiratory Tract Infections (URTIs) (*Jong; Klement*), cough (*Rutten*), otitis media (*Jacobs, Fixsen*) as well as malaria (*Brands*) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (*Shah*) while presentations on non-communicable diseases included adjunctive cancer treatments in adults and children (*Brulé; Rossi; Talarico*), psychiatric disorders (*Viksveen; Tapakis; Blyden-Taylor*), Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (*Fibert*), spinal surgery (*Raak*), hypertension (*Chye Phing*) and iatrogenic disorders (*Pareek*).

In a year which saw publication of a negative report on homeopathy by Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council, the closing keynote address of the conference by Dr Robert Mathie (British Homeopathic Association, UK) presented detailed data from his recent systematic review on individualised homeopathic treatment.⁴ Unlike previous meta-analyses, which made little to no distinction between different types of homeopathy, this ground-breaking study looked solely at randomised placebo-controlled trials (RCTs) of individualised homeopathic treatment. For the first time this analysis enabled us to see clearly what the evidence from RCTs tells us about the efficacy of ‘usual care’ as provided by homeopaths in practice; this robust study found that individualised homeopathic medicines are up to twice as likely as placebo to be beneficial, even when results from only the highest quality trials were considered and results were pooled across different clinical conditions.

Basic research

Following from Prof Bellavite's opening address other researchers at the conference presented their work within the field of laboratory-based research. Cellular models of high dilution bioactivity were presented, including the effects of homeopathic *Arnica* on gene expression in human macrophages *in vitro* (*Oliosio*); the cytotoxic and apoptotic effects of *Echinacea* on breast cancer cell lines (*Aguilar Velazquez*); and flow cytometric assessment of *ex vivo* CD4⁺ T cells in response to a range of remedies given to patients with chronic aggressive periodontitis (*Ostermann*).

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