

Homeopathy As a Form of Practical Magic

Jonathan Simmons

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Abstract

Homeopathy is generally thought of as a form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) developed in the late 1700s. Although homeopathic medicine is little more than a placebo from a scientific perspective, advocates of the treatments have nonetheless influenced medical practice, research, and public health. In this article, I examine homeopathy and its significance as a form of practical magic and part of the occulture or “cultic milieu,” which refers to a spectrum of mainstream beliefs and practices that herald an ongoing reenchancement process (Partridge, 2016). By focusing on homeopathy’s status as a health practice, scholars have failed to take its more esoteric roots seriously. This contribution is important because, though medicine and science have both advanced rapidly since the era of miracles and magical cures, many consumers turn to homeopathy instead of conventional treatments to both imbue the everyday with spiritual meaning and solve concrete problems left unaddressed by conventional medicine.

Keywords: homeopathy; magic; occulture; religion; health

In November 2009, the United Kingdom’s House of Commons Science and Technology Committee recommended that the National Health Service (NHS) stop funding homeopathy, a form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM; House of Commons, 2010, p. 34). In 2017, despite concerns about limiting consumers choice, the NHS decided to stop funding homeopathic remedies, meaning that homeopathic remedies would no longer be available by prescription. Homeopathy is a popular but controversial form of health treatment with magico-religious undertones. In what follows, I argue that we should not understand practices such as homeopathy merely as pseudoscience. Rather, homeopathy is an

example of a complex magical system that has been become “scientificized” and ubiquitous (Granholt & Asprey, 2014, p. 15). Many scientific and medical professionals see modern medicine as a secular and scientific activity, and the NHS’s decision to stop funding homeopathy was in part driven by this rationalistic worldview (given the NHS’s desire to prioritize treatments with robust evidence of clinical effectiveness). Nevertheless, the NHS, like many other health care systems, is facing significant challenges in its attempts to secularize healing (Harrington, 2005). For example, the British Homeopathic Association (BHA) brought a legal challenge against the NHS’ decision to stop paying the cost of homeopathic remedies (Donnelly, 2018). More broadly, alternative medicines continue to present an attractive worldview to consumers, one that reflects “premodern conceptions of health and the body” (Robertson, 2014, p. 19). Although advocates for CAM embrace what might be called a magico-religious approach to health, many practitioners of these alternative treatments seek out scientific credentialism and also acceptance within the same scientific and medical communities that decry the harms of pseudoscience and quack medicine. More importantly, health consumers often see the presence of homeopathic remedies on pharmacy shelves as an indication of the treatment’s legitimacy, and they may not distinguish between evidence-based medicine and its less well-grounded alternatives.

Further complicating matters, celebrities have substantial influence on the public’s health-related behaviors. Consider that Steve Jobs (1955–2011), the late founder and CEO of Apple, apparently turned to CAMs such as homeopathy for his relatively mild form of cancer (Greenlee & Ernst, 2012). One need not look far for many similar cases. Consider, for example, actress Gwyneth Paltrow’s advocacy of homeopathy, which she describes as “the first line of defense” against ailments in “most