

# HAHNEMANN COLLEGE FOR HEILKUNST

## PART I: HISTORICAL CONTEXT





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## ***A BRIEF HISTORY***

The story of the birth and foundation of *homeopathy* is essentially the story of one man, a genius and medical reformer, born Christian Frederick Samuel Hahnemann in the town of Meissen, Saxony, a small town tucked away in the southeast of Germany.



The records are not clear on the exact date of his birth. Hahnemann was born near or just after midnight, April 10, 1755. His father was a painter at the Meissen porcelain factory, which is still famous throughout the world.

Hahnemann grew up in a relatively well-educated yet modest family.

Samuel was a boy of thin stature, physically delicate, fair-haired and blue-eyed. He did not enjoy robust health and preferred intellectual study to more physical pursuits. He showed strong self-discipline and independence of mind early in his life, as well as an aptitude for languages. He developed a life-long attachment to nature, particularly to the beauty of the Saxon countryside through which flowed river Elbe.

Much of what we know of his early childhood comes from a short autobiography he wrote hastily in 1791 from memory. This autobiography is not entirely accurate, but it gives us a clear insight into the mind and spirit of Samuel Hahnemann, and the principles and ideas that motivated his life's work.

**MY FATHER... HAD FOUND FOR HIMSELF THE  
SOUNDEST CONCEPTIONS OF THAT WHICH IS GOOD AND  
CAN BE CALLED WORTHY OF MAN. THESE IDEAS HE  
IMPLANTED IN ME. 'TO ACT AND TO LIVE WITHOUT  
PRETENCE OR SHOW,' WAS HIS MOST NOTEWORTHY  
PRECEPT, WHICH IMPRESSED ME MORE BY HIS  
EXAMPLE THAN BY HIS WORDS. HE WAS FREQUENTLY  
PRESENT THOUGH UNOBSERVED WHERE SOMETHING  
GOOD WAS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED. SHOULD I NOT FOLLOW  
HIM?...I SPENT SEVERAL YEARS IN THE TOWN SCHOOL  
OF MEISSEN, AND WHEN ABOUT SIXTEEN YEARS OF AGE  
I ATTENDED THE PRINCE'S SCHOOL OF THAT TOWN.  
THERE IS NOTHING OF SPECIAL NOTE TO REPORT  
ABOUT ME AT THAT SCHOOL, EXCEPT THAT THE  
RECTOR ... ACCORDED ME LIBERTIES IN MY STUDIES...  
[AND] IN MY TWELFTH YEAR HE AUTHORISED ME TO  
IMPART TO OTHERS THE RUDIMENTS OF THE GREEK  
LANGUAGE... I WAS FREQUENTLY AILING FROM  
OVERSTUDYING... HERE I MADE IT MY DUTY TO GRASP  
WHAT I WAS READING RATHER THAN TO READ TOO  
MUCH, TO READ LITTLE BUT CORRECTLY AND TO  
CLASSIFY IN MY MIND THE PORTION ALREADY READ  
BEFORE CONTINUING.**

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We can see here the early foundations of Hahnemann's interest in nature, in careful observation, and long study. His father's directions – never to be just a passive observer – reflected the leading educational ideas of the time amongst the cultured classes of Europe, particularly those of Jean Jacques Rousseau. As a leading German exponent of the time stated, these ideas were:

Never to learn or listen passively.

To act and to be oneself without vain display.

Never to act contrary to the sublime conception of the first principle of Creation, of the dignity of mankind or its lofty destiny.

As a young boy, Hahnemann kept a collection of local plants and flowers, and he often went into the neighboring hills to gather specimens.

At the age of 20, young Samuel Hahnemann left his hometown for the University of Leipzig, some 50 kilometers to the northeast of Meissen. There he undertook the study of medicine. Leipzig had a well-established reputation as a center for learning throughout Europe. The great German scientist and poet, Goethe, had studied there only five years earlier. Student life was difficult and sparse, with little money for heat or food in the cold winters. However, it was here that Hahnemann learned the importance of physical exercise and proper diet for the maintenance of health in the face of the demands of long study, a lesson that stayed with him throughout his long life, allowing him to remain of sound body and mind until his death at the age of 88.

**I CAN TESTIFY FOR MYSELF THAT ALSO IN  
LEIPZIG I PRACTISED MY FATHER'S MAXIM  
NEVER TO BE A PASSIVE LISTENER OR LEARNER.  
BUT HERE I DID NOT QUITE FORGET TO  
PROCURE, BY PHYSICAL EXERCISE AND FRESH  
AIR, THAT BODILY ENERGY AND VIGOUR WHICH  
ALONE ENABLE THE BODY TO STAND  
SUCCESSFULLY THE STRAIN OF CONTINUED  
MENTAL EXERTION.**

Already at this age Hahnemann was earning money from his knowledge of languages, giving private lessons in French and German and translating scientific works from English. Showing his independent spirit, Hahnemann only attended those courses and lectures that he felt were most suitable and useful. As it happened, he was generally disappointed by the quality of the medical training he was receiving at the University of Leipzig medical school, and he preferred to spend time on self-study. Instead of useful information and practical experience, he received dull theory and speculation, and this at the most famous and popular university in Germany. The medical school did not even have a clinic or practical component in its program.

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Despite the difficult journey and lack of funds Hahnemann was determined to travel to Vienna in search of a better education. There he found the practical medical education he wanted at the Brothers of Mercy hospital, run by the physician to the Empress. Dr. Quarin accepted to teach Hahnemann without monetary compensation, so impressed was he by the student's desire to learn, and his courage, self-discipline and hard work. After nine months Hahnemann, with Dr. Quarin's help, found a position as a physician to a wealthy Saxon, the Governor of Transylvania.

After having amassed some savings, Hahnemann again moved, this time to Erlangen, Germany, in order to formally complete his medical education. In the summer of 1779, Hahnemann received his medical diploma.



Medical education in Hahnemann's time left much to be desired. It was mostly theoretical and full of conflicting systems. The students were, as one commentator of the time noted, effectively "let loose on an unsuspecting public to learn medicine by trial and error!"

As Goethe, the famous German poet and scientist and a contemporary of Hahnemann, observed (in a speech by Faust to his assistant Wagner while walking the outskirts of Leipzig):

This was the medicine: the patient died,  
And no one thought of asking who recovered.  
So 'mongst these hills and vales our hell-broths wrought  
More havoc, brought more victims to the grave  
By many than the pestilence had brought.  
To thousands I myself the poison gave:  
They pined and perished; I live on to hear  
Their reckless murderer's praises far and near.

Hahnemann's ethical standards, powers of observation and keen intellect, however, would enable him to rise above this rather miserable standard and develop a remarkable system of medicine firmly grounded in the laws of nature, and perfected by the powerful tool of human reason.

In the period 1780-1785, Hahnemann married, saw his first child born and moved several times, ever searching for a suitable place to set up a permanent practice and raise a family. He was already critical of the scholastic medical practices of his time, seeing more value in folk medicine, grounded in experience, than the empty theorizing of academic medicine. Though he kept within the main precepts of the medicine of his day, he was able to publish criticisms in the medical journals of his day outlining the need for reform:

**IN SPITE OF THIS, MY PRIDE DOES NOT PREVENT  
ME FROM CONFESSING THAT VETERINARY  
SURGEONS ARE USUALLY MORE SUCCESSFUL,  
THAT IS, HAVE MORE SKILL IN THE TREATMENT  
OF OLD WOUNDS THAN THE MOST LEARNED  
PROFESSORS AND MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIES.**

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**DON'T SHOUT, THIS IS ONLY EMPIRICISM. I WISH I HAD THEIR PROFESSIONAL SKILL BASED UPON THEIR EXPERIENCE, WHICH THEY HAVE FREQUENTLY ONLY ACQUIRED THROUGH TREATING ANIMALS; I WOULD WILLINGLY EXCHANGE IT FOR SEVERAL MEDICAL VOLUMES IF THEY AGREE...SO MUCH IS TRUE, AND THAT SHOULD MAKE US MORE MODEST, THAT ALMOST ALL OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE HEALING PROPERTIES OF THE SIMPLE AND NATURAL, AS WELL AS OF THE ARTIFICIAL PRODUCTS, IS LARGELY DERIVED FROM THE CRUDE AND AUTOMATIC APPLICATIONS OF THE ORDINARY MAN, AND THAT THE CONSCIENTIOUS PHYSICIAN FREQUENTLY DRAWS IMPORTANT DEDUCTIONS FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE EFFECTS OF THE SO-CALLED HOUSEHOLD REMEDIES, WHICH ARE INVALUABLE TO HIM. THEIR IMPORTANCE DRAWS HIM MORE AND MORE TO SIMPLE NATURE AMIDST THE REJOICING OF HIS PATIENTS.**

Between 1785 and 1792, Hahnemann moved only twice. In the provincial capital, Dresden, he was able to further his practical medical knowledge and write many scientific works.



One, on chemistry, advocates the preparation of one's own medicines when it is not possible to detect impurities. In all, Hahnemann published some 2,200 printed pages in addition to his medical work, leading one biographer to marvel at his "unusual capacity for work, at the energy, the industry and zeal with which the man of thirty to thirty-four years accomplished this task."

It was also in this period that Hahnemann became fully conscious of the failings of the medical art and science of his day. He became convinced that the medical practices in vogue were both ill-founded and dangerous. In a style that was to characterize his dealings with his peers from then on, he attacked them openly and eloquently, almost like an Old Testament prophet foretelling of the doom that would befall those who would not change their ways.

One work, *Arsenic Poisoning*, gives us a flavor of his views and his passion for the reform of a system corrupted by ego, dogma, vacuous theorizing, and adulterated medicines, and which, as a result, caused more harm than good, far removed from the spirit of the Hippocratic Oath.

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**A NUMBER OF CAUSES, WHICH I WILL NOT RECOUNT HERE, HAVE FOR SEVERAL CENTURIES REDUCED THE DIGNITY OF THAT GOD-LIKE SCIENCE, PRACTICAL MEDICINE, TO A WRETCHED BREADWINNING, A GLOSSING OVER OF SYMPTOMS, A DEGRADING COMMERCE IN PRESCRIPTIONS – GOD HELP US! – TO A TRADE THAT MIXES THE DISCIPLES OF HIPPOCRATES WITH THE RIFF-RAFF AND MEDICAL ROGUES, IN SUCH A WAY THAT ONE IS INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE OTHER.**

**HOW RARELY DOES AN HONEST MAN, OCCASIONALLY, SUCCEED IN RAISING HIMSELF, BY EXCEPTIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND TALENTS, ABOVE THIS SWARM OF QUACKS, AND IN THROWING SUCH A PURE AND GENUINE SPLENDOR OVER THE SCIENCE AT WHOSE ALTAR HE WORSHIPS, THAT EVEN THE MOB COULD NOT MISTAKE THE VENERABLE AND FRIENDLY EVENING STAR FOR THE MISTY SHOOTING STARS. HOW RARE IS SUCH A PHENOMENON, AND THEREFORE, HOW POWERLESS IS HE TO RENEW THE DECAYED PATENT OF NOBILITY FOR THE PURIFIED MEDICAL SCIENCE. (HAEHL, VOL. I, P. 33-34)**

Here we can see that Hahnemann was quickly coming to the conclusion that there could be no reform from within, but that the entire foundation of medicine, what he termed “The Old School,” needed to be rebuilt. This called for radical reform, a surprising notion from someone generally of conservative origin. However, Hahnemann had always shown himself willing to take on tradition and authority if it no longer deserved respect, for the greater good of his fellow man and the advancement of the art and science of medicine — in his words, that most “God-like” pursuit of man.

In September 1789, Hahnemann moved back to Leipzig to be nearer the cultural center of Germany. He next came to a very difficult decision, but one that was fully consistent with his growing convictions and which would have momentous consequences for the future course of medicine. Hahnemann chose to abandon the practice of medicine according to the rules of his time as he was convinced that it harmed more than it helped the patient. Now his growing family would have to subsist almost entirely on his translations and writings.

The medical advice Dr. Hahnemann dispensed in this time was mostly related to diet and regimen, as well as hygiene. One of his first writings of this period was *Friends of Health*, a compendium of advice on diet and exercise, fresh air and hygiene that he had given out individually to those who had sought his advice. In this work, Hahnemann largely pre-dated the efforts of other reformers to combat the epidemic diseases then raging across Europe, such as typhoid and cholera. Hygiene, as any history of medicine can attest, was not then a topic of study in medical schools, and those who attempted to raise the subject were generally ridiculed.



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Hahnemann gave individual advice, taking into account the particular circumstances of each person. He was not inclined to give much credence to the various general systems of diet and regimen often urged on patients, but rather favored reliance on patients' healthy instinct as a guide to what was best for them. He also stressed the need for ethical regimen, that is right living, following the Greek ideal of the Golden Mean, moderation in all things.

**I MUST FEEL FOR MYSELF WHAT IS USEFUL FOR ME AND HOW MUCH OF IT; IF I DO NOT KNOW IT, NO ONE ELSE DOES. THEREFORE DO NOT THINK BADLY OF ME, BROTHER, IF I AM SOMEWHAT PREJUDICED AGAINST THOSE UNIVERSAL RULES OF DIET MEANT TO APPLY TO SENSIBLE PEOPLE. FOR, IS NOT EVERY MAN'S STOMACH AS PECULIAR TO HIM AS HIS FOOT, WHICH ANOTHER MAN'S SHOE DOES NOT AND CANNOT FIT? [HAHNEMANN LAYS DOWN AS THE] ONLY INFALLIBLE GUIDE TO SALVATION IN DIET: MODERATION AND ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF THE INDIVIDUAL CONSTITUTION UNDER ANY GIVEN CONDITIONS... MODERATION, STRICTNESS, NOT A MODERATION INFLUENCED BY A SPOILT AND PAMPERED PALATE, IS THE SUPREME PHYSICAL VIRTUE WITHOUT WHICH WE CANNOT BE HEALTHY OR HAPPY. [ONE MORE THING TO BE ADDED IS] CHEERFULNESS AND CONTROL OF ALL PASSIONS, SINCE PASSIONS ARE LOWERING AND MAKE US SUSCEPTIBLE TO DISEASE. (HAEHL, VOL. I, P. 51-52)**

As for exercise, Hahnemann taught that it, along with fresh air and fresh water, was a key element of health:

**NEXT TO FOOD, EXERCISE IS THE MOST ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENT OF THE ANIMAL MECHANISM – IT IS THAT WHICH WINDS UP THE MACHINERY... EXERCISE AND GOOD AIR ALONE SET ALL THE HUMOURS IN OUR BODY IN MOTION TO FILL THEIR APPOINTED PLACES, AND COMPEL EVERY SECRETING ORGAN TO GIVE OFF ITS SPECIFIC SECRETIONS, GIVE POWER TO THE MUSCLES AND TO THE BLOOD ITS DEEPEST RED COLOUR; THEY REFINE THE FLUIDS SO THAT THEY PENETRATE EASILY INTO THE MOST MINUTE CAPILLARY VESSELS, STRENGTHEN THE HEART BEATS AND BRING ABOUT HEALTHY DIGESTION. THEY ALONE BEST INVITE US TO REST AND SLEEP, WHICH IS A TIME OF REFRESHMENT FOR THE PRODUCTION OF NEW SPIRIT AND ENERGY. (HAEHL, VOL. I, P. 52-53)**

While Hahnemann had given up the practice of medicine according to the methods of his time – strong drugs, blood-letting, fontanelles, formula diets (often starvation) – he continued to advocate good diet, exercise, fresh air, etc. He maintained this emphasis on regimen as an important element of his approach to treatment of disease until the very end.

We can see the extent to which Hahnemann viewed the scope of medicine as including almost every aspect of life, or rather, the importance of many aspects of life on one's health. His work touches on sanitation, prisons, marriage, education, behavior, etc. – all things that can be said to have an influence on health in the broadest sense.

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Hahnemann insisted that mothers breastfeed their children, and he gave instructions on how this could be done. He further insisted on the importance of fresh air in the nursery, the lack of such being the “first and greatest cause of most of the diseases of childhood.”

In addition to personal hygiene, Hahnemann was one of the first medical reformers to speak of social hygiene. *Friend of Health* gave explicit instructions for the isolation of contagious disease cases in hospitals, the use of large and well-ventilated rooms, the disinfection of all utensils and living rooms used by such patients. He advocated the destruction of the old quarters of towns with their narrow, airless lanes and enclosed, dank rooms and recommended replacing them with new dwellings. The draining of marshes and the laying out of new suburbs were other means he advocated to promote health.

Contrast Hahnemann’s description of the typical town dwelling of his day with his vision for the new suburbs:

**IN ORDER TO SAVE FUEL AND HIGH RENTS, SEVERAL MISERABLE FAMILIES WILL OFTEN HERD TOGETHER, FREQUENTLY IN ONE ROOM, AND THEY ARE CAREFUL NOT TO LET IN ANY FRESH AIR THROUGH WINDOW OR DOOR, BECAUSE THAT MIGHT ALSO LET IN THE COLD. THE ANIMAL EXHALATIONS FROM PERSPIRATION AND THE BREATH BECOME CONCENTRATED, STAGNANT AND FOUL IN THESE PLACES; ONE PERSON’S LUNGS DO THEIR BEST TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE OTHERS ALL THE SMALL AMOUNT OF LIFE-GIVING AIR REMAINING, EXHALING IN EXCHANGE IMPURITIES FROM THE BLOOD. THE MELANCHOLY TWILIGHT OF THEIR SMALL, DARKENED WINDOWS IS COMBINED WITH THE ENERVATING DAMPNESS AND MUSTY SMELL OF OLD RAGS AND ROTTING STRAW: FEAR, ENVY, QUARRELSOMENESS AND OTHER PASSIONS DO THEIR BEST TO DESTROY COMPLETELY WHAT LITTLE HEALTH THERE IS... HERE CONTAGIOUS EPIDEMICS NOT ONLY GO ON SPREADING EASILY AND ALMOST UNCEASINGLY IF THE SLIGHTEST GERM HAS CHANCED TO FALL THERE, BUT IT IS HERE THEY ACTUALLY ORIGINATE, BREAK OUT AND BECOME FATAL EVEN TO MORE FORTUNATE CITIZENS.**

**IN LAYING OUT NEW TOWNS, NO HOUSES MORE THAN TWO STORIES HIGH SHOULD BE ALLOWED; EVERY STREET SHOULD BE BUILT AT LEAST TWENTY PACES WIDE AND PERFECTLY STRAIGHT, SO THAT AIR COULD BLOW FREELY THROUGH IT, AND BEHIND EACH HOUSE...THERE**

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**SHOULD BE A YARD AND A LITTLE GARDEN, RUNNING THE WIDTH OF THE HOUSE AND AT LEAST TWICE ITS LENGTH... AND THIS WOULD BE SUCH AN EFFECTIVE METHOD OF SUPPRESSING INFECTIOUS DISEASES AND OF IMPROVING THE GENERAL HEALTH, THAT MOST OF THE RULES OF PRECAUTION AGAINST EPIDEMICS WHICH I HAVE GIVEN ABOVE WOULD THEREBY BECOME TO A GREAT EXTENT SUPERFLUOUS. (HAEHL, VOL. I, P. 58)**

While Hahnemann worked hard to find a better way to prevent disease through regimen, he despaired of his ability to find a better way of using medicine to cure disease. In 1805, looking back on this initial period, he wrote:

**AFTER THE DISCOVERY OF THE WEAKNESS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF MY TEACHERS AND MY BOOKS I SANK INTO A STATE OF MORBID INDIGNATION, WHICH MIGHT ALMOST HAVE COMPLETELY VITIATED FOR ME THE STUDY OF MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE. I WAS ABOUT TO BELIEVE THAT THE WHOLE SCIENCE WAS OF NO AVAIL AND INCAPABLE OF IMPROVEMENT. I GAVE MYSELF UP TO MY OWN INDIVIDUAL COGITATIONS AND DETERMINED TO FIX NO GOAL FOR MY CONSIDERATIONS UNTIL I SHOULD HAVE ARRIVED AT A DECISIVE CONCLUSION.**

## LAW OF SIMILARS

Hahnemann continued his medical research, however, and in 1789 came the first suggestion that cure could be attained assuredly and scientifically through the ancient **principle of similars**.

This principle stated that cure can only come from the use of medicine against a disease that produced a similar (artificial) disease in a healthy person. The use of medicine that produced opposite effects could only suppress symptoms without curing the underlying disease. For example, a painkiller may remove your headache, but it does not cure the underlying cause of the pain.

The principle of opposites was considered to apply to the realm of regimen: if you were lacking in fresh air, exercise, nutrition, you needed to supply these missing elements; if, on the contrary, you were taking in too much of a good thing (too much food, for example), or were being exposed to things of a deleterious nature (such as chemicals), then you needed to limit this exposure.

While these two principles were known, the use of the application of the principle of similars was not consciously (scientifically) developed for two main reasons: the problem of dose (the use of crude doses was too strong, even lethal, when applied on the basis of similarity) and no one knew how to determine, except by trial and error, whether a medicine was being applied on the basis of similarity. As a consequence, medicine developed

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instead the application of the principle of opposites. This gradually declined into the effort simply to remove symptoms, without a concern for whether this removal was palliative, suppressive or curative.

The prevailing medicine of our day is not based on any conscious application of either the law of similars or opposites, but works generally on the basis of the latter, hence anti-biotics, anti-depressants, anti-histamines, anti-inflammatories, etc. Since current medical orthodoxy is interested more in the effect of a drug (to remove symptoms) than in the principle of application (which is the only means of knowing whether the treatment is curative or palliative/suppressive), Dr. Hahnemann referred to this approach as allopathy or allopathic medicine (“allo” meaning without any principle of application other than effect – empiricism).

Hahnemann then began to formulate a system of medicine based on principle and natural law, as opposed to the blind empiricism of folk medicine and the empty theories of the academic medicine of his day.

## **MODERN RESEARCH REGARDING THE EFFICACY OF HOMEOPATHY**

The difficulty with acceptance of the law of similars is not in the law itself. Most German doctors, at the time Hahnemann first came up with his new system of medicine based firmly on the law of similars as the curative law, had little difficulty accepting this claim. The two principles of treatment (law of similars and law of opposites) had been known since Hippocrates’s time over 2000 years earlier. Thus, there was much interest in the new system.

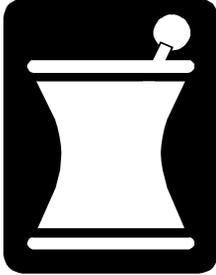
However, problems began to emerge when Dr. Hahnemann continued to dilute the dose by means of the process of potentisation. He used smaller and smaller doses because he wanted to reduce the disease (iatrogenic) effects of the medicine (as most medicines tend to be poisonous in nature) while still retaining the therapeutic effects. Dr. Hahnemann was well aware that historically the law of similars had fallen into disuse because of the problem with dose.

While the law of similars had long been seen as the law of cure, two problems prevented the development of its use in medicine:

1. the first was the problem of determining when a medicine was acting according to the law of similars. Dr. Hahnemann solved this problem through the use of *provings*, carefully controlled clinical trials on healthy people;
2. the second was the problem of dose – the power of the law of similars meant that too strong a dose was actually quite dangerous.

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Dr. Hahnemann was fully aware of this second problem, being also a celebrated chemist, as well as of the negative effects of medicine generally (even when applied to suppress or palliate symptoms).



Almost from the beginning he used small doses relative to the usage of his time. If a common dose was 10 grains (20 grains = 1mg.), he might then use only 1 grain, or even 1/1000 part of a grain. His colleagues considered these very weak doses (although today we are more used to medicines in the form of micrograms).

Gradually, Dr. Hahnemann developed his serial method of dilution and succussion (this will be discussed in more detail in the section on homeopathic pharmacy). He discovered that when he continued to dilute the medicine in chemical terms, something else was happening (through the succussion, or vigorous shaking of the solution) that actually increased the therapeutic effects of the medicine. He eventually called these new forms of medicine “potencies.” As a chemist, recognized that what he was dealing with was a form of bio- energy rather than biochemistry.

It is here, with the potencies, that many of Dr. Hahnemann’s supporters, who had lauded his efforts to reform the medicine of his day, parted company with him.

Already with the low potencies, such as 3C (which is a dilution of 1/1,000,000) or 6C (1/1,000,000,000,000), the material amount of the medicine was becoming so small that it raised considerable skepticism in medical and scientific circles. At this point in the history of science, and even to a large degree today, chemistry formed the model for medicine and for the explanation of the effectiveness of a given substance. This skepticism as to the ability of dilutions of medicine that approach and go beyond the boundaries of chemical action (represented by Avogadro’s Constant or a dilution that corresponds roughly to a 12C potency – or 1/1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) continues to this day.

Until recently, the main methods of testing the effectiveness of a medicine or approach were purely clinical or anecdotal.

There is a great deal of historical evidence for the effectiveness of homeopathy, particularly in the official records of past infectious disease epidemics, such as cholera or influenza.

## RECENT EVIDENCE

Over the last several decades, the issue of scientific evidence for effectiveness has been linked to the randomized clinical trial (RCT). It is often surprising for people to realize that the RCT is only about 40 years old in its application to medicine, in particular allopathic medicine.

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While it was never intended as a “proof” of efficacy, the RCT does provide one means of assessing whether a medicine is more effective than placebo. While placebo is often assumed to mean no effect, it actually is a concept that contains within it the vexing questions of suggestion, belief and human interaction, that is, the qualitative or artistic side of medicine. Placebo can actually be very powerful in its effects, but material science has sought to know to what extent a given medicine or approach is objectively effective (that is, independent of the qualitative factors).

There are many philosophical difficulties with the RCT as a measure of effectiveness, the so-called “gold standard,” (if you want to learn more on this, you might wish to read Harris Coulter, Ph.D., *Homeopathic Science and Modern Medicine - The Physics of Healing With Microdoses*). However, even if we accept the validity of the RCT, there are also many methodological problems in adapting the approaches of homeopathic medicine to the RCT. In addition, the costs of RCTs are quite high and until very recently, little research money (most of which comes from the drug companies) has been available for testing the efficacy of homeopathic medicine in this manner.

However, given the prevalence of the RCT as a measure of legitimacy, various efforts have been undertaken by homeopaths to demonstrate that homeopathy is more than “a placebo effect.” An example of such a study is the following:

J. Jacobs, D.A. Springer, D. Crothers, *Homeopathic Treatment of Acute Otitis Media in Children: A Preliminary Randomized Placebo-controlled Trial*, *Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal*, 20, 2 (February 2001):177-183.

This study concluded that there was a “statistically significant reduction in symptoms, including earache, temperature and irritability compared to placebo.” This is in comparison to the effectiveness of the standard treatment with antibiotics which the medical literature indicates is only of marginal benefit.

A meta-analysis published in the September 20<sup>th</sup> 1997 issue of *The Lancet*, the main British medical journal, undertook a rigorous examination of the RCTs published in the last decade and concluded that the evidence was strong that homeopathic medicines produced a therapeutic effect that was greater than placebo. The editorial in that issue could not fault the meta-analysis itself, but still questioned the conclusion because if it were correct, then many aspects of current medical science would have to be overturned. This editorial is a good example of the skepticism and resistance that homeopathic medicine has had to face in its 200-year history, despite solid clinical and, more recently, also RCT evidence.

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Here is a report on one of the most recent studies, done by one of the premier researchers in homeopathy, Dr. David Reilly of the Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital:

**Scottish study shows allergy patients respond to treatment, those on placebo don't**

By Nancy A. Melville

HealthScout Reporter

**SUNDAY, 3 December (HealthScout) -- A new Scottish study has proved that homeopathic therapy can be effective...**

Upon randomly treating 50 patients suffering from nasal allergies with either a homeopathic preparation or a placebo, the research team in Glasgow found that those who were given the real thing had significantly greater improvement in nasal air flow.

The study, published this summer in the *British Medical Journal*, involved a daily measurement of patients' nasal air flow along with such symptoms as runny, blocked or itchy nose, sneezing and eye irritation.

Those on the homeopathic treatment had a 28 per cent improved nasal air flow over the course of four weeks, compared with just a 3 per cent improvement among those in the placebo group.

"We were very surprised by the results, especially because they were so clear," says Dr David Reilly, a researcher at Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital and lead author of the report. In a commentary also published in the *British Medical Journal*, complementary medicine researcher Andrew Vickers wrote that the battle over homeopathic medicine, once raging, is subsiding with more studies indicating the therapies can work...

The book, *An Introduction to Homeopathic Medicine in Primary Care*, by Sidney E. Skinner, pp. 5-10, provides more information on various published studies.

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## STUDY EXERCISES - PART I: HISTORICAL CONTEXT



1. Briefly discuss Dr. Hahnemann's efforts at reform of the medicine of his day. What do you think Dr. Hahnemann would say were he alive today?
2. Briefly indicate the two principles of medicine and why Dr. Hahnemann called the medicine of his day "allopathy." Do you feel it is still correct to call the currently prevailing approach to medicine "allopathic medicine?"

