

Homoeopathy booming in India

In India, where homoeopathy is a national medical system, the market is growing at 25% a year, and more than 100 million people depend solely on this form of therapy for their health care, the popularity of the dilute remedies shows no signs of abating. Raekha Prasad reports.

In the western Indian state of Maharashtra, Shantaram Chavan, a poor farmer diagnosed as HIV positive, responded in desperation to an advertisement in a local newspaper placed by Siddharth Jondhale, a homoeopathic doctor, who said he had found a cure for the virus. For 1 year, Chavan took the drug administered by Jondhale at his private clinic. He sold his tractor to raise the 150 000 rupees (US\$3800) to pay for the so-called miracle cure that Jondhale named HIV-SJ. During that year, the farmer's condition deteriorated.

India has the world's third highest caseload of HIV/AIDS after Nigeria and South Africa. Jondhale's clinic drew in hundreds—all of whom had seen one of his leaflets or read his website that claimed he had cured 4000 people with HIV in the past 2 years. Last month, the law finally caught up with Jondhale and he was prohibited from advertising the fanciful claims. He is currently under investigation by medical authorities.

The case, which made headlines in the national press, highlighted the widespread acceptance of homoeopathy in India as a viable treatment for the most serious of diseases. Around 10% of India's population—more than 100 million people—depend solely on homoeopathy for their health care, according to the Indian government.

The nation has almost a quarter of a million registered homoeopathic doctors—more than any other country in the world. The result is a permissive medical culture which sees "natural treatments" put on a par with scientific ones. Homoeopathy has become deeply rooted in India's public health provision—it has the third largest government-supported infrastructure after ayurvedic and modern medicine.

The Indian government has almost 11 000 homoeopathic hospital beds and three-quarters of all registered practitioners have been trained by the state. Medical students, regardless of whether they intend to be homoeopaths or modern medics, share the first 3 years of training. The result is that India's creaking public-health system faces competition from not only a well resourced private sector in conventional medicine but also a cheaper, widely available homoeopathic service. A visit to a homoeopathic doctor costs less than half the price charged by a medical doctor in India.

Another attraction is homoeopathy's reputation of being harmless, SPSingh, the Ministry of Health and Welfare's adviser on homoeopathy told *The Lancet*. "It does not give side-effects. With a small quantity of medicine we can serve a lot of people." Despite evidence to the contrary, Singh says that homoeopathy "has a biological effect" and that "all homoeopathic medicines are therapeutically proven".

India is arguably unique in the extent to which it has recognised

homoeopathy as a legitimate system of medicine. Despite originating in Germany, the Indian government has bestowed it with the status of a national medical system. India is also unusual in that it has seven national medical systems of which modern medicine is but one. Also recognised and administered by a special state department under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare are ayurveda—India's traditional medical treatment—yoga, naturopathy, unani—a system dating back to ancient Greece, siddha, one of India's oldest health therapies from the south, and homoeopathy. The department, known by the acronym Ayush, has a budget of 10 billion rupees (\$260 million) over 5 years. "Money is not a problem", said Singh. "It will be spent on education, training, standardisation of drugs, implementation of health programmes, and rural health care."

Singh's defence of homoeopathy sits uneasily with the conventional, scientific approach to medicine. The Indian government adviser says that homoeopathy gives patients options

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

Private homoeopaths in India charge less for their services than conventional medical doctors



Photoberry

German missionaries introduced homeopathy to India 200 years ago

and is complementary to modern drugs. "In cases of crisis management allopathic is better, but if you have digestive problems then maybe [homeopathic] is better. It is up to people to choose what they like."

Homeopathy is included under the umbrella department that is foremost intended to develop and sustain Indian health systems because of the notion that it shares some of the key characteristics of indigenous ancient medicine. "It has blended so well into the roots and traditions of the country that it has been recognised as one of the National Systems of Medicine and plays an important role in providing health care to a large number of people", the government website states.

Homeopathy was first brought to India almost 200 years ago by German missionaries who distributed remedies in Bengal. But it was not until 1839 when John Honigberger, a Romanian homeopath and disciple of the father of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, successfully treated the then ruler of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in Lahore that homeopathy gained the royal patronage that enabled it to take root in India.

Health experts, however, are concerned that many homeopathic and ayurvedic doctors administer pharmaceutical drugs to their patients. "They [homeopathy and ayurveda] provide a back-door entry into medicine. Those who don't get

into medical colleges try to get into general practice in rural areas through the other systems", says Amar Jesani, an editorial board member of the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*.

The issue came to light in a high-profile case that reached India's highest court in 1996, after a patient died after a registered and qualified private homeopath gave him a cocktail of antibiotics—including drugs for typhoid. The court awarded the deceased's spouse compensation and ruled the doctor guilty of negligence. The Supreme Court held that cross-practising amounted to quackery, stating: "a person who does not have knowledge of a particular system of medicine but practices in that system is a quack and a mere pretender to medical knowledge or skill, or a charlatan". Despite the ruling, cross-practising persists. As many as 90% of doctors qualified in a system other than modern medicine are administering pharmaceutical drugs, according to the 52nd round of India's National Sample Survey.

Apart from a growing pool of doctors trained in homeopathy, the therapy's appeal is also due to the failure of the Indian public-health system which is ill equipped to serve the country's vast population. According to the UN Development Programme, India has just 48 physicians per 100 000 people. The poor provision means people turn to the private sector, both modern and homeopathic, which is lightly regulated.

However, medical physicians, say experts, are concentrated not only in private practice but also in predominantly wealthy urban India. This distribution again compounds the problem because poor people in rural areas, who make up most of India's population, are left with little choice but to visit the cheaper, more accessible homeopaths or ayurvedic doctors. "The government of India does not have incentives for allopathic doctors to go to rural areas. There is one doctor for every 250 people in Bombay and one

for 10 000 people in a rural area a few hundred kilometres away", says Jesani.

Like their contemporaries in the west, say health researchers, wealthy Indians see homeopathy as a route to wellbeing. The result is a booming domestic industry, which has given rise to several corporate homeopathic services. Estimated to be worth 6.3 billion rupees (\$165 million) this year, the homeopathy market is growing at 25% a year and within a decade spending on private homeopathy will be almost 60 billion rupees (\$1555 million). "An elite group of upper-middle and rich classes in India consider homeopathy to be fashionable. This has led to corporatisation", said Ravi Duggal, an independent health consultant in Mumbai. "Ethics are not on the agenda in [Indian] medicine. Making money is."

However, companies say that homeopathy needs to be professionalised to dispel the image that treatments are merely low-cost quackery. Mukesh Batra, who founded India's largest homeopathic chain of clinics—Dr Batra's—said most of his patients came for chronic conditions and that "15% have terminal illnesses". Batra says his clinics treat 130 000 people a year and his cyber clinic, which e-mails treatment plans and sends homeopathic medicine in the post to patients, treats another 450 000 worldwide. The homeopath is keen to break into new markets—even if national laws are designed to keep his products out. "There are 20 countries where homeopathy is illegal. We can break real boundaries [with the online system]", he said.

Batra, who claims to have remedies for miscarriage and stammering, defended homeopathy against its critics from the scientific establishment, saying that "everyone has a different personality so they have a different need. You will never get an agreement on what should be used. There are 200 medicines for a headache".

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