Homeopathy: Research and Research Problems (preclinical and clinical)

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4.1 Introduction and Research Problems

The discussion of the problems and value of homeopathy presupposes a thorough knowledge of its scientific foundations. The fundamental difference between conventional medicine and homeopathy requires the employment of different research tools. While both systems rely on exact empirical observation, their methodologies and pharmacologies differ in the way their medicines are manufactured, in their modes of observation and treatment and in their therapeutic objectives.

For an adequate evaluation of the literature available today and for the assessment of the effectiveness, appropriateness and economy of homeopathy, the following facts need to be taken into account: 200 years of experience with a vast number of patients, numerous case reports in the literature, unexplored material available in homeopathic practices and reports about successful treatment in large-scale epidemics have never been systematically and scientifically researched. The most recent in-depth surveys go back to the late 1980s and were conducted by Walach 1986, Poitevin 1987 and Righetti 1988. In recent years, only selective surveys (Kleijnen et al. 1991, Boissel et al. 1996, Walach et al. 1997, Linde et al. 1997, Clausius 1998, Linde & Melchart 1998, Ernst 1999, Cucherat et al. 2000, Wein 2002, Mathie 2003 and Dean 2004) have been published, along with a number of papers relating to specific indications.

To what extent the systemized experience from particular periods of time is being considered as ‘soft’ empirical facts in the scientific and public debate is not primarily a question of scientific research but mostly an epistemological question with political and social dimensions.

Homeopathy has its own particular research tradition and has always relied on empirical research. Its system-immanent research includes drug provings on the healthy subject, the exact phenomenological observation of symptoms and reactions, the individualized treatment of the patient on the basis of the similarity principle, evaluation of the healing processes, and observation of numerous individual cases and – in epidemics – collectives as well as its special drug manufacturing techniques. From the point of view of homeopathy, this is the only kind of research that is relevant to its practice. The results of the empirical observation which determines the quality of the homeopathic treatment can be found in the homeopathic Materia Medica, in the symptom manuals that are based on it (repertories) and in its rules of dosage and application.

Leaning on its own philosophy and research system, conventional medicine often displays a sceptical and dismissive attitude towards this kind of research and its results and insists on randomized, controlled, double-blind trials as clinical proof of efficacy. This approach is seen as controversial even within evidence-based medicine, especially when applied to complex systems such as psychotherapy and homeopathy.

Many experimental and clinical trials that were based on the methods of conventional medicine have been carried out in homeopathy over the past decades with a view to gaining scientific and political recognition. From a homeopathic point of view, it was justification research more than anything else and did not provide any new insights into homeopathy as such. Homeopathy experts continue to claim that the great majority of existing homeopathy trials were conducted with inadequate means, that their designs ignore essential principles of homeopathy and thus increase the likelihood of false-negative results. The trials have almost nothing in common with the actual practice of homeopathy in Switzerland; their external and model validities are very low (cf. Chap. 5). The proponents of homeopathy point out that research results thus obtained, even though significant in the pharmacotherapy of conventional medicine, are of little relevance to homeopathic practice and therefore hardly known among homeo-