Homoeopathic Preparations – Severe Adverse Effects, Unproven Benefits

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Sir,

Although the superiority of homoeopathic drugs (HD) over placebo has never been proven, more and more doctors and patients prefer HD to 'allopathic' drugs due to their alleged lack of side effects. And quoting the argument: 'If they don't help, they at least don't harm'. many doctors in Europe [1] and abroad [2] prescribe HD for usually minor problems; homoeopathy has thus also become 'big business'.

We recently saw 3 patients with severe side effects due to HD that had been recommended by their doctor or pharmacist as being effective and safe. Patient 1 suffered from influenza and took a homoeopathic 'phyto-immunostimulans for unspecific stimulatory therapy against infections' (original text). The product contains, among other plant extracts. Peruvian bark and Ipecacuanha (D4) and is described as being without side effects. After 3 days he developed pruritus, massive swelling of palms and soles, and then erythroderma. High-dose steroids and anti-histamines were necessary for treatment. Patient 2 wanted to

reduce weight using 'slenderness drops' that contained 15 plant extracts in homoeopathic potencies. 2 days after starting intake according to the instructions, she developed a morbiliform and pruritic rash, which then became confluent and urticarial, and resulted in a week-long admission to the hospital. Patient 3 suffered from mild hayfever. Peroral application of a homoeopathic mixture of grass pollen as recommended by her doctor caused anaphylaxis and required treatment in an intensive-care unit with adrenaline, steroids and intravenous fluid supplementation. Skin testing revealed a high degree of sensitivity to grass pollen and blood testing specific IgE antibodies against grass pollen (g3; RAST class 4). Re-exposure provoked similar symptoms in all 3 patients.

The doctrine of homoeopathy claims benefits for extracts in high dilutions and denies any dangerous side effects. But despite more than a century of use, still no scientific rationale for this therapy [3] exists; no pharmacologic, -kinetic and toxicologic data or animal studies to give HD therapy scientific credibility [4] are available. HD therapy is thus viewed with a great deal of suspicion by the scientifically oriented community [2, 5] and this skepticism [6] could not be dispelled by some recent placebo-controlled clinical trials [1 , 7–10] and laboratory studies [11]. We could demonstrate side effects of HD that were unexpected but reproducible upon re-exposure. HD may thus not be as harmless as is common belief and should therefore not be employed as an alternative to scientifically investigated drugs.

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