

Homeopathic medicine has patients flocking, but some docs scoffing

By Benjamin Protes

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When Dr. Edward Shalts, a homeopathic physician, treats patients in his 10-by-10-foot office on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he always wears a tie.

He does so, he said, so patients will take him and the relatively unknown medicine he practices seriously.

“I’m very formally dressed because what I do is weird enough,” said Shalts, 52, who is also an M.D. board certified in psychiatry.

Homeopathic physicians--like Shalts--use diluted natural remedies, such as phosphorous, to stimulate the body’s innate healing abilities, without the side effects of conventional medication.

Some conventional doctors scoff at homeopathy in part because some states don’t require homeopaths to have a medical degree or license to practice. Many homeopaths train through certificate programs and short courses at the few part-time homeopathy schools available in the United States.

Nevertheless, a growing number of Americans are using homeopathy to treat a range of chronic illnesses, including asthma and fibromyalgia. And recent federally funded medical studies show homeopathy effectively treats these and other conditions.

James Otero, 33, had been suffering from asthma his entire life when he sought Shalts’s help in early 2001.

“I couldn’t do anything,” Otero recalled. “I couldn’t be around dust, I couldn’t have any pets.

“I felt like I was living in a bubble.”

For nearly two hours, Shalts sat at his desk, across from Otero, asking probing questions and plugging his findings into a database of remedies on his laptop.

At first, Otero found this approach “a little strange.” But, within a month of taking Shalts’s suggested remedies, Otero’s asthma had mostly disappeared.



Dr. Ed Shalts, a homeopathic physician, searches a database of natural medical remedies inside his Manhattan office. (Photograph by Benjamin Protes)

“I feel like a completely different person,” he said. “I even have two cats.”

Despite patient success, homeopathy remains entrenched in a 200-year battle with mainstream medicine, dating to when conventional physicians created the American Medical Association, in part to challenge homeopathy’s growing popularity.

Shalts has grown frustrated with his colleagues in conventional medicine who reject the treatment he swears by.

“I find this whole antagonistic relationship quite ridiculous,” Shalts said between sips of tea.

“I’m not fighting a war. My job is to make patients better.”

Shalts emigrated from Russia in 1988, where he said homeopathy was wildly popular, albeit exclusive, unlike in the United States.

“I couldn’t understand how such an advanced country didn’t realize how much benefit there is to homeopathy.”

Impressions are changing, however, as over 50 million Americans currently use homeopathic medicine in some form, according to Peter Gold, spokesman for the National Center for Homeopathy.

Homeopathy has even grown famous in Hollywood among celebrities like Jennifer Aniston, Axl Rose and David Beckham, according to the book “The Homeopathic Revolution,” published last year.

This fervor has translated into a 35 to 40 percent growth in sales of homeopathic remedies in the last five years, Gold said.

The number of homeopaths lags behind this booming interest in the medicine. While there are 5,000 members of the National Center for Homeopathy, fewer than 500 are actually homeopaths, and most use homeopathy along with another health care practice, such as conventional, dental and even veterinary medicine.

“We’re enjoying great success,” Gold said. “But a battle is still going on.”

Now the battle is being waged in medical journals, with federally funded research offering a recent boon to homeopathy.

In a 2005 study, the respected British medical journal, *The Lancet*, reported that “data is compatible with just a placebo effect for homeopathy,” Dr. Peter Juni, one of the article’s authors, said in a recent interview.

Since *The Lancet* proclaimed “the end of homeopathy,” other research has shown it to be effective at treating a wide range of serious illnesses like multiple sclerosis and ADHD, as well as more acute ailments, like respiratory and sinus infections.

“When so many things are going wrong at once, homeopathy can really shine,” said Dr. Iris Bell, a homeopathic researcher and professor at the University of Arizona College of Medicine.

Joyce Ancona, of Elk Grove Village, Ill., for instance, had a perfect storm of illnesses: sinus infections, allergies and endometriosis, the latter requiring hormone therapy.

As a registered nurse, she was hesitant to use homeopathy, until 10 years ago when she realized prescription drugs just weren't helping anymore.

Ancona, 57, had taken 17 different medications that year alone.

"It got to the point where we were treating side effects of medication with additional medication," Ancona said. "It takes away from enjoyment of life."

Within a day of taking the remedy lycopodium, Ancona felt better. She hasn't had a sinus infection in nine years and has weaned off all prescription drugs.

"I'm in better health now than in my 20s," she said. "When taking homeopathic remedies, your health just keeps getting better and better."

But Shalts cautioned against using remedies as a catchall. Far from a zealot, Shalts believes conventional medicine has its place.

"I'm from Russia, we work with the system."

Homeopaths are also trying to change the system to boost homeopathic research and practice, the lack of which remain key obstacles to achieving mainstream acceptance.

Bell said she is the only funded researcher doing clinical examinations of homeopathy in the United States, though planning has begun in Phoenix on what would be the country's only full-time homeopathic medical school.

"People consider homeopathy a joke in mainstream medicine," she said. "They have no reason to risk their careers on this."

Shalts, on the other hand, has staked his career on homeopathy, and is proud of it. He has written two books on the subject, and prominently displays a portrait of the father of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, on his office walls.

Meanwhile, he has all but given up trying to convince his traditional medical colleagues of what he sees as homeopathy's virtues.

"I'm not a salesman, I practice medicine," he said, his back to a wall crowded with diplomas and certificates.

And no feud will keep him from that.

"I see miracles with homeopathy every day," he said. "That's why I keep doing it."

E-mail: bpp2106@columbia.edu