



## Royals' favoured hospital at risk as homeopathy backlash gathers pace

The Queen loves it. But alternative medicine centre's future looks uncertain as more NHS trusts axe funding

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Britain's leading homeopathic hospital, supported by the Queen and the Prince of Wales, is facing crisis because the medical establishment is turning against the remedies used by tens of thousands of people every year.

Dr Ian Fisher, personal homeopath to the Queen and clinical director of the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, of which the monarch is patron, has written an open letter asking for help to save it. He blames 'an orchestrated campaign' against alternative medicine by some of Britain's most distinguished doctors.

The Queen, an advocate of homeopathy, alongside Catherine Zeta Jones and Sir Paul McCartney, always has 60 vials of alternative remedies in a leather carrier when she travels abroad in case she falls ill. Homeopathic remedies - which use minute and diluted doses of natural substances - have been attacked by scientists as unproven.

'The basic problem is that several Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), the local bodies which pay for NHS care, have stopped, or drastically reduced, their funding of treatment at the RLHH,' said Fisher in the letter. 'If too many PCTs stop funding, the hospital may be forced to close. We are already having to cut our services. PCTs have generally justified their decisions by claiming that scientific evidence of effectiveness for homeopathy and other complementary therapies is lacking.' Twenty-five hospitals from London and southern and eastern England have already either stopped sending any patients to the RLHH or agreed to fund only a handful, Fisher warns.

The Prince of Wales, who has clashed with the medical establishment several times over his staunch support for alternative therapies, publicly praised the 157-year-old RLHH when he performed the re-opening ceremony there in 2005 after a £20m refurbishment. 'Prince Charles is sympathetic, supportive and concerned. But he doesn't feel it's appropriate to intervene in any way because there's been some adverse publicity before about him "meddling"', said Fisher last night.

According to Fisher, cutbacks across the NHS are mostly just an excuse for PCTs to stop paying the hospital to treat patients suffering with conditions as diverse as eczema, food intolerance, extreme pain, digestive disorders and cancer. Many have 'effectiveness gap conditions', where conventional medicine has not helped, such as osteo- arthritis of the knee, which the RLHH treats with a course of acupuncture.

Fisher says that the real reason many PCTs have ended their contracts is because they felt pressurised to do so after receiving a letter last year from 13 of Britain's leading doctors urging them not to waste funding on what they described as unproven, ineffective complementary treatments. The signatories included Sir James Black, a past winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine, and cancer specialist Michael Baum, who despaired of the NHS paying for 'utterly bogus' alternative therapies such as homeopathy at the same time as it was saying it could not afford to help women across the country by paying for the breast cancer drug Herceptin.

Baum, Emeritus Professor of Surgery at University College London, returned to the attack last night. 'If the Royal London were to close because of PCT deficits we would scarcely miss it,' he said. 'Homeopathy is no better than

witchcraft. It's no better than a placebo effect. It's patronising and insulting for adults.'

Baum believes the RLHH, an ornate building in Bloomsbury, in central London, should cease to be a hospital dedicated to homeopathy, a role it has performed since 1849. It currently treats about 9,000 patients a year and costs about £5.5m to run - a tiny sum by NHS standards. 'Instead you could have a centre for palliative and supportive care, which would be of greater benefit and involve half the cost. Rather than losing something, we would gain something,' Baum said.

But Carol Boyce, a homeopath involved in the campaign to save the hospital, said that losing it would deny patients the choice of treatment the government was keen to promote.

Robert Naylor, chief executive of the University College London Hospitals NHS Trust, to which the RLHH belongs, last night pledged: 'The trust has no plans to close the RLHH. It is the most important hospital in western Europe in alternative and complementary medicine, and an international centre for these types of treatment.'

'There's no danger that the hospital will close. But if there's a national decision by PCTs in unison not to fund homeopathic treatments, we would have to discontinue provision of homeopathic treatment.'

A Department of Health spokeswoman said PCTs were free to decide what forms of treatment they felt willing to pay for and that the ministry could do nothing to prevent the possible closure of such a flagship hospital.

### Cure or con?

Homeopathy is hugely **divisive**. Supporters say it brings **relief** where other, more conventional treatments have failed; critics claim it is **ineffective** and medically unproven. It is the best known of a group of alternative therapies, such as reflexology, acupuncture and aromatherapy.

Devised in the late 18th century by the German physician **Samuel Hahnemann**, homeopathy is based on his principle of 'similia similibus curentur', or '**let like be cured by like**': if you give a patient a small, heavily diluted dose of a substance that would create symptoms of illness in a healthy person, they will be cured. Homeopaths dispense **remedies**, not drugs. Remedies are made from natural ingredients such as extracts of plants, animals and minerals.

Large sections of the medical establishment view homeopathy **negatively**. 'Study after study has shown it is simply the purest form of **placebo**. You may as well take a glass of water,' says **Edzard Ernst**, the UK's first professor of complementary medicine.

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