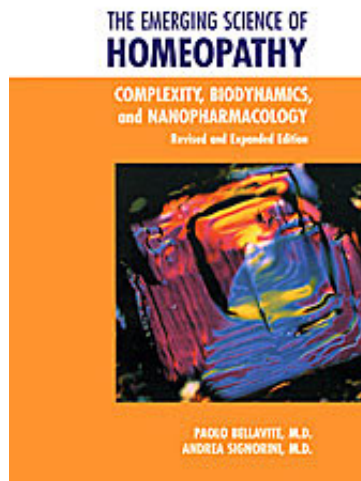


Bellavite P. / Signorini A. The Emerging Science of Homeopathy

Reading excerpt
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Foreword

In 1996 homeopathy celebrated its 200th anniversary. It originated with the seminal publication *Essay on New Curative Principle*, written by Dr. Samuel Hahnemann in 1796. The use of medicines on the basis of similarity was not new, and can be traced much earlier in the history of medicine, but Hahnemann was the first to systematize it and to introduce the very high dilutions or homeopathic potencies, which are the source of most of the controversy which surrounds homeopathy.

Over the last two centuries, the fortunes of homeopathy have fluctuated widely: for most of the 19th century, despite the sometimes vehement opposition of the medical establishment, it enjoyed a period of rapid growth, spreading widely and increasing in popularity throughout Europe and North America. This was followed by an equally dramatic decline in the 20th century, so that it had almost disappeared in the USA and been reduced to a shadow of its former self in Europe by the 1970s. Yet, in what must be one of the least anticipated recent developments in medicine, it has staged a strong, worldwide resurgence in the 1980s and 90s.

How are we to account for this roller-coaster evolution? Some of it can be explained by cultural and political factors, for instance, its decline in the USA was certainly hastened by the 1910 Flexner Report on medical education which resulted in the closure of most of the homeopathic medical colleges. While its recent renewal has been associated with growing disillusionment with conventional drug treatment and its adverse effects, the growth of a 'counter-culture' in the West, and the promotion of acupuncture in the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s.

But these cultural and political factors are not the motor driving the evolution of homeopathy. The roots of these fluctuations lie in its relationship with the evolving concepts of science, a relationship which has not always been comfortable, but which has had a profound influence on the perception of homeopathy by scientists, doctors, and the general public. The origins of the tangled relationship between homeopathy and science are to be found with the Italian aristocrat-scientist Count Amodeo Avogadro who, in 1811, enunciated the principle now known by his name, which enables the number of particles in a given mass of a substance to be calculated. The correctness and significance of Avogadro's Law was not generally appreciated until the mid-19th century. But when its implica-

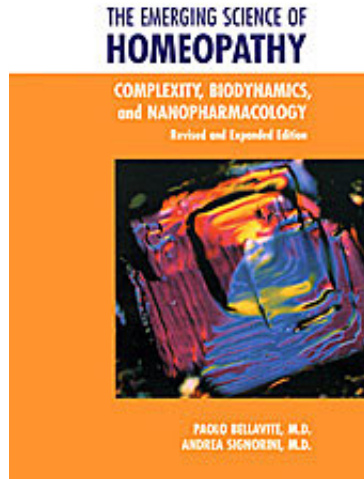
tions for homeopathy were understood, the effect was profound, since it implies that none of the starting substance is present in the high "ultra-molecular" dilutions used in homeopathy.

This realization triggered a split in the homeopathic movement in the latter half of the 19th century, between the so-called "highs," led by the American homeopath James T. Kent, who used very high dilutions on a theoretical basis influenced by Swedenborgian metaphysical concepts, and the "lows," associated with the British homeopath Richard Hughes, who attempted to reconcile homeopathy with contemporary pathophysiological concepts.

But apparent scientific improbability is a two-edged sword, and, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is cutting the other way. Earlier, scientific preconceptions appeared to make homeopathy impossible. But we now have scientific methods sufficiently sensitive to demonstrate the actions of the very high dilutions used in homeopathy, providing empirical evidence of the reality of some of the claims made for homeopathy. At the same time theoretical concepts deriving from the leading edge of science are starting to provide a theoretical underpinning to the growing body of experimental evidence. The problem of "ultramolecular" dilutions are no longer the fundamental barrier to an understanding of homeopathy that were for earlier scientific conceptions. Homeopathy is now stimulating theoretical innovation, instead of theory inhibiting the acceptance of homeopathy.

Paolo Bellavite and Andreas Signorini provide an authoritative, up-to-date and comprehensive survey of the exciting empirical and theoretical developments in homeopathy. In addition to a thorough account of the empirical evidence, they give the best account I have read of the theoretical implications for homeopathy of the new sciences of chaos, complexity and information. I warmly recommend their book to all who are interested in understanding homeopathy, a therapy whose scientific time has finally arrived.

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