



Homeopathy for the over 60s

by Bob Leckridge

A major seven-part series

Life stages – a homeopathic guide

From the moment we are born, through every day of our lives, we undergo constant change. We mature, we grow, we develop, responding to both environmental influences and to the programmes in our genes. This series examines some of the issues we encounter in the various phases of our lives. Each stage brings new challenges, so each article will focus on the kinds of health problems, which people might encounter in each particular stage.

The focus of the articles is self-help but if the problem is complex, or chronic, the best course of action might be to consult a homeopathic doctor. Most of the problems discussed here are acute, self-limiting conditions, which can be safely treated with homeopathic medicines. If you have some symptoms which would normally lead you to consult your doctor, see your GP or, if you have one, your homeopathic doctor. Don't try to treat a problem yourself with homeopathy instead of consulting your doctor.

More and more people are living well past the age of retirement. Average living conditions and improvements in the treatment of infectious and other acute diseases are generally held to be the main reasons. This is resulting in an increasing percentage of the whole population being "elderly". However, many "elderly" people are really pretty healthy and lead very active lives.

Here is the first problem. How do we refer to the over 60s?

"Pensioners" doesn't seem quite right because there is an implication that someone who has been pensioned off has been sidelined or abandoned. The medical term, "geriatric", has become quite derogatory. Indeed, I once heard a doctor who specialised in the treatment of older people saying that he thought we should abandon the term "geriatric" altogether. He no longer wanted to be known as a "geriatrician". He proposed we use the term "elderly" instead and claimed this would allow him to rename his speciality as "elderology". An "elderologist", he said, would look after his patients in a ward known as "Eldorado"! I think he was joking. "Senior citizens" seems somehow quaint now and the modern "grey panthers" is positively ghastly.

Maybe part of the difficulty lies in the fact that not everyone over 60 is the same. Isn't it interesting that in this series on the seven life stages, the last one is the only one which applies to an age group stretching for more than two decades? Should we really consider

people in their 60s to be the same as people in their 90s? For the purposes of this series we will and I am going to get round the labelling problem by making this article be about the "over 60s".

It could be argued that what this age group has in common is that they are the people with chronic illnesses. This is a fair observation. Most chronic diseases are due to degeneration of tissues and of body functions. When something degenerates, its healthy efficiency is lost. This is an age of losses. Other diseases are more destructive than degenerative, such as cancer and heart disease. However, being over 60 isn't all about degeneration and destruction. It can be about previously unexperienced independence and freedom – the independence of having only choices about your own life to make, having moved on from family responsibilities, and the freedom from work commitments of time, energy and effort.

Flow

The concept of flow is an interesting one when we think about health. A healthy person has the experience that life is flowing smoothly and one of the characteristics of illnesses in the over 60s is a disturbance, or even loss, of flow.

At a physical level there may be an impedance of flow because of painful joints due to arthritis. Bryonia is a commonly indicated homeopathic medicine for arthritis. The patient who responds best to Bryonia usually feels quite restless. They would like to move but every

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small movement is painful and so they have to try and keep very still. Indeed they might even hold the affected part or press it against a firm surface to gain relief.

Pulsatilla, on the other hand, is more commonly indicated when continued, gentle motion relieves the pain. Continuous changeability is the most important feature to remember when thinking of Pulsatilla. The person's pains continuously change. Their right knee might be painful in the morning but by afternoon it's their left elbow and by the following day it's moved again to the right ankle. Literally, it's all over the place!

In between is Rhus tox which is indicated when the patient is very restless but finds the first movements very painful as the joints stiffen up with rest. Once they get going, continued movement actually relieves the pain. Rhus tox, by the way, is the classic medicine for patients who get sore when the weather gets cold and damp. Homeopathic medicines cannot arrest the wearing out of the joints but in stimulating the body processes of self-healing and repair, it can ameliorate much of the pain and stiffness.

Constipation

Another physical problem caused by loss of flow is constipation. It isn't a subject people like to talk about but the word constipation is used in several different ways. For some people it means they can't manage to empty their bowels daily, whilst for others, although they can go every day, it is always painful. Calcarea carbonica is a common homeopathic medicine for older people because almost all of its indications are about slowing up. It can be very useful in chronic constipation, but most typically in people who are really not that bothered about that problem. Some will even say they actually

feel worse when their bowels move so they almost prefer being constipated. In these patients it seems that all bodily and mental processes have slowed up. They are chilly, usually overweight and do everything slowly.

Another common medicine for chronic constipation is Silica. This is indicated in patients who have to strain hard to pass a stool and who can have a lot of rectal pain (frequently associated with having an anal fissure). Like Calcarea carbonica, this is also indicated when there is a rather deficient metabolism which shows itself in Silica in chilliness, sweaty feet and a tendency for scratches, cuts and infections to take a long time to heal up.

Prostate problems

In older men another flow problem is caused by the prostate gland becoming enlarged and slowing up the flow of urine. It is important to have this problem checked out by a GP because it can occasionally be due to cancer of the prostate gland. However, it is much more commonly due to what is called Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy, which is just a simple swelling of the prostate gland. Sabal serrulata is a commonly indicated homeopathic medicine for this condition. Usually when this medicine is useful the prostatic hypertrophy is associated with a degree of impotence.

Chimaphila is another common treatment for the swollen prostate gland, especially where the patient has discomfort which leads him to complain of a sensation as if he is sitting on a ball.

Isolation

The problem of flow being disturbed at this age is not just a physical one but it is also a mental and a social one. In fact, pain and stiffness in the joints, or having to run frequently to the loo, can have significant impact on a

person's social life preventing them from managing to leave the house and so resulting in them becoming isolated and withdrawn. This can lead to depression which just compounds the feelings of being cut-off.

There are a number of possible homeopathic medicines which might help to alleviate some of the social or emotional isolation by stimulating the person's healing system, which, in turn, helps them to cope with their changed circumstances. Pulsatilla, mentioned earlier as a common arthritis medicine, is also useful in alleviating these problems because the person in the Pulsatilla-type state will be feeling abandoned and weepy. They will long for company and feel better when others commiserate or sympathise with them.

Magnesium carbonicum can also help if the person is feeling very isolated and has become very sensitive to cruelty, to sad stories and especially to violence on the TV, to the extent that they may have to switch the set off when the news comes on. The people who benefit from this medicine will likely complain that their pains are unbearable and will have a tendency to flares of anger which pass very quickly.

Mental slowing down

If the brain starts to have flow problems it shows with impaired memory, poor concentration and difficulty holding on to a train of thought. These problems are of course worst in dementia but they can occur to some degree in almost all older people. Medicines such as Petroleum, Alumina and Baryta carbonica are each commonly indicated as a treatment for people with such mental slowing. We tend to think of memory as being a single skill but in fact people who have developed dementia have shown us that different people develop more or less difficulty with different types of memory loss.

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Homeopathy illustrates this well and so helps us to make a better understanding of people with dementia. The typical patient who needs Petroleum will have memory problems which are mostly to do with spatial orientation – they will get lost when they go out into surroundings which should be familiar to them. Alumina is indicated for anxious people who feel hurried a lot and who cannot remember what they have just said and Baryta carbonica is for those who become a bit childish in their old age. It's indicated for people who have problems finding the right words to say, and who go off home and leave their purchases in the shop.

Sleep problems

Another common interruption of flow in the brain is that of sleep function. For many older people sleep just does not flow as easily as it used to. This is partly because as we get older we actually need fewer hours sleep at night whilst we also develop a pattern of cat-napping through the day. Coffea cruda is a treatment for insomnia where the problem is due to a constantly active mind. These people just can't get to sleep because of the continuous flood of thoughts in their overactive minds.

Passiflora is a particularly commonly indicated treatment for sleeplessness in older people who may be generally a bit weak but may have no other significant problems. Of course if the reason for the insomnia is pain then the cause of the pain must be dealt with directly. For example, some people suffer from disturbances of sleep because they have night cramps. If this is the case then a dose of Cuprum metallicum each night before retiring may solve the problem.

Grief and loss

Apart from all these disturbances to the easy flow of energies and

functions, once people are over 60 the other common difficulty they experience is how to cope with loss. When loved ones or friends die it is normal to experience grief. However, it becomes a significant problem if the suffering continues for a long time or becomes so severe that normal life is overwhelmed. Psychologists have described four stages to the grieving process. Initially there is shock. The person just can't really take in what has happened. The full significance has not sunk in. This stage typically only lasts a few hours

is really the most obvious phase of coping with the loss.

Homeopathic medicines do not numb pain or take it away artificially and the process of bereavement is normally a healthy one which, although distressing, does not need any kind of medical treatment. Everybody actually copes with bereavement in their own unique way and a homeopathic medicine may only be required if it is felt that they need help to move on at any stage.

Almost any homeopathic medicine can potentially be useful

Photo: Grant Lynch © 2005



For the over 60s, a common problem is coping with the loss of friends and loved ones – homeopathic medicine can help people who may become stuck in any stage of the grieving process

and gives way to a time of distress where the mental pain is very acute. This is typically a very unstable time with rapidly changing mood swings and outbursts of tears. This may either be accompanied by a period of anger, or may progress into a period of anger with the anger being felt towards both to those who cared for the person who has died in their last illness and towards the deceased person themselves. The final stage is of resolution and acceptance which

in resolving grief if it is prescribed on the basis of the individual's distinctive reaction. However, there are two medicines which are the most commonly indicated. Ignatia is frequently the best medicine for those experiencing overwhelming suffering in the acute, or early, stages of grief. These are people who may be just completely numbed and unable to speak or eat or do anything. Or they may be in the stage of acute pain with rapid mood swings, suddenly bursting into tears at

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Photo courtesy of Anne Coates

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any moment, followed immediately by laughter. It can be a useful medicine at the funeral when emotions are at their most acute and unstable.

Natrum muriaticum is mostly indicated for people with chronic grief who are stuck, anxious, withdrawn and constantly looking back and dwelling in the past. How long is it before we would consider grief to have become chronic? Well, there is no definitive number of weeks. It is

more an issue of the extent to which the person seems to be overwhelmed and stuck. If they are beginning to become ill themselves because of it then they may need the help of Natrum muriaticum.

Positive factors

The situations I have described here paint a rather bleak picture of being over 60. So let's wind up the series by considering the issue of health rather than disease because there is no reason why being over 60 should inevitably be equated with suffering and loss. We tend to take our health for granted. It is something we don't even think about until it isn't there any more. However, the whole process of considering the principles on which homeopathy is based gives an opportunity to consider health in its own terms and a well chosen homeopathic medicine can help to promote health at any age.

Health can be considered to have three characteristics. It is the ability to cope with change – not to just put up with change but to adapt, develop, mature and become able to thrive in changed circumstances. Secondly, it is the ability to be creative, in the sense of being able to come up with novel solutions to our personal

difficulties and of being able to express our true uniqueness in life. Thirdly, it is about engagement. As well as being individuals we are social beings. It is important for us to be in relationships where we are loved and loving. Being involved with others and with our world gives our lives purpose and without purpose it is hard to find a reason to get up in the morning.

Considered in this way, the well chosen homeopathic medicine can enhance all three of these healthy characteristics – adaptability, creativity and engagement. At all stages of life such good health can help us to grow, whether physically, mentally or emotionally, and it is through good health that we overcome disease. This is a very different way of viewing life because the more common view in our society is that health is achieved by eliminating disease. This is one of the reasons why homeopathy is so satisfying – it focuses on health rather than becoming sidetracked into an obsession with disease. We are all different and we all have our own unique ways of coping. Recognising this uniqueness can be the answer to the puzzle of how to have good health at all stages of life.

If you are going to use any of the medicines mentioned in this series, unless a specific dose is recommended by your homeopathic doctor, use a 30c strength and repeat the doses as often as is necessary. The rule in homeopathy is to take a dose, experience the improvement, then if the improvement starts to decline, repeat the remedy. If a dose does not produce any improvement, then there is no point in repeating that particular remedy.

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