

Making sense of health and illness

A MAJOR NEW THREE-PART SERIES by Bob Leckridge MBChB FFHom



All photos by Jane Kelly

The homeopathic approach, the whole understanding of health, of illness and of human beings which has developed from Hahnemann's first principles into our present day level of understanding has great potential to teach us how to stay healthy and how best to deal with illness. This series considers some of the basic principles of homeopathy, focusing on making sense of health and of illness. These insights will enable the reader to take practical steps to be more able to experience better health, to understand that our solutions are in our own hands. We can actively enhance our self-healing.

This pull-out and keep series includes:

Observation and self-reflection

Patterns of illness

Causes and courses of disease

Observation and self-reflection

The homeopathic remedy, Arnica, has been dubbed "the great introducer" because it is the introduction to homeopathy for so many people. It can be purchased over the counter in pharmacies and health food stores and it has a simple indication for use – bruising. People often buy it because they have injured themselves and want something that will do more than just give pain relief. They want something, which will actually help them to get better more quickly. They want the injury to heal quickly and permanently. More than this, people don't want to take a medicine that will give them even more problems than they had before they took it. They want something that is free of side-effects. Arnica fits this bill. It does all these things for many people.

In medicine, there is nothing more impressive than the remedy that actually works. Unfortunately we often find that the medicine we are prescribed doesn't do "exactly what it says on the tin"! So, most people who take Arnica for bruising are very impressed. In this case, it does just what it claims it will do. It enables a complete and natural repair rapidly. This is not uncommonly the very first experience of homeopathy that a person will have. This experience then leads us to think that maybe homeopathic remedies will

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work as impressively and as quickly for other problems. This is where the problems begin.

One of the key features of homeopathy is that “like cures like”. That sounds nice and easy, but it isn’t. Samuel Hahnemann, who developed the homeopathic method says, at the start of his book, *The Organon*, which explains the method, “The physician’s highest calling, his only calling, is to make sick people healthy – to heal, as it is termed.” He was right. It is still the reason why doctors learn homeopathy. They want to make sick people healthy. Hahnemann goes on to describe how to do this with homeopathy. “If the physician clearly perceives what has to be cured in disease, if he clearly perceives what it is in medicines which heals... if he knows in each particular case how to apply the remedy most appropriate by its character, prepare it exactly as required and give it in the right amount, and repeat the dose exactly when required... then he knows how to treat thoroughly and efficaciously, and is a true physician.”

The first time I read that, I thought I understood it. I’ve read it many times since. It’s amazing how concisely it captures what we are trying to do. All we need to know is the full, unique story of the patient, then to find the single best remedy for that patient. The single best remedy is the one whose description in the *materia medicae* (the books where these remedies are described) is the most similar to the description of the illness, which the patient has given. Here’s where it begins to get very tricky. There are over 3,000 remedies to choose from. They all have uniquely different descriptions. Which one is most like the patient’s description of their illness?

That sounds pretty tricky, and it is, but it gets even trickier once you stop to think, and realise that every single illness in every single person is unique. Now, you might be thinking, “But a bruise is a bruise, no matter who has it, isn’t it?” and you’d be right, up to a point. That’s why Arnica is the great introducer. Most bruises are similar. However, Arnica doesn’t work for everyone’s bruises. Why not? The reasons are revealed by paying closer attention. All bruises might look the same, but there are differences. Not all bruises feel the same, and not all are relieved in the same way. For example, in some circumstances, the bruised part will feel better if a cold application is applied to it. In other circumstances, it will feel better if a hot application is applied. Some bruised areas feel worse if they are touched. Others feel better if gentle, firm pressure is applied. You can begin to imagine the wide range of potential differences.

However, there is something else to consider. A bruise might be a bruise, but a bruise doesn’t exist alone. There is a person who has that bruise. That person is unique and they may well react in quite unusual or unique ways when they have that bruise. The injury might have made them angry, or it might have knocked their confidence so they become anxious, or it might have demoralised them



Your healing systems are working all the time

and made them sad. They will react to these emotions differently and will try to cope with them differently. So, for some people, in some circumstances, Arnica will not help their bruise. What then? Sadly, in such an event, people often conclude that homeopathy doesn’t work after all. They are wrong. It was only Arnica which didn’t work, and it didn’t work because it was not the remedy which best matched their illness. If they don’t give up, what might they do then? Well, they either have to try to find the better match themselves, or they have to consult a homeopathic practitioner who has more knowledge of the remedies than the patient does.

Self-help guides

Most of the homeopathic self-help books available are designed to try to help the reader to select the right remedy in a given circumstance. They are useful up to a point. In simple, acute situations, with clear, common symptoms, the patient might find a useful remedy. So, Arnica becomes not the only remedy in the medicine cabinet. Maybe the layperson will add more remedies as other situations arise. Chamomilla might help the teething infant, or Colocynthis, the colicky baby, or Nuxvomica may relieve the hangover or the food-poisoning, and so on. *Health & Homeopathy* has carried a number of useful articles of this type over the years.

Sometimes, after using a few remedies purchased over the counter in this way, a person might be curious to find out a bit more about homeopathy. This may well lead them into discovering the idea of the “polychrests”. These are very commonly indicated remedies, which have a wide range of uses. Dr David Lilley’s masterclass series has been an excellent introduction to some of these. As

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he points out, the descriptions of the “polychrests” are like the archetypes within us all, so it isn’t difficult to see our own similarities to these pictures.

These two approaches, the cookbook approach to finding an acute remedy, and the learning the “polychrests” approach cover almost every homeopathic book ever written for a public readership. Both approaches have value and both can be quite fascinating. However, both are firmly focused on something called “remedies”. In this new series, I want to fill a gap. There is a lot more to homeopathy than remedies.

The homeopathic method can help us to gain a better understanding of why we are sick. It can help us to discover, not only how to become well again, but also, how to stay well. In short, it can help us to make sense of health and illness. It can do this without even taking any remedies, but if we learn about the method and what it teaches us about ourselves, it will make it much easier to find the best remedies for our illnesses. It will help us to navigate that tricky path from illness to health. Finally, by greatly enhancing our understanding of ourselves and of others, learning about the homeopathic method can help us to grow and fulfill our destinies.

Does that sound all too good to be true? Is it too grand a claim? Well, read these articles, try out the exercises and test it for yourself. That’s probably what you did with Arnica after all. It only convinced you because it worked.

Symptoms and labels

Remember that simple summary of how homeopathy works? “Like cures like”. The first “like” in that phrase refers to remedies. As I mentioned earlier, there are plenty of books and articles available which help you learn the descriptions of the remedies. I want to concentrate on the second “like” in the phrase. That second “like” is you, or whoever is ill. Orthodox medicine has developed in a way that gives priority to a disease over a person. This is despite the exhortations of many great physicians, including Dr Osler, who said, “It is better to treat the person that has the disease, than the disease that has the person.” (His book *Principles and Practice of Medicine* [1982] became a standard text.)

Much medical training is about establishing a diagnosis. By diagnosis we tend to mean a clinical label. It is the label that applies to a collection of symptoms and characteristic changes in tissues and organs. These symptoms and changes are the ones, which are shared by everyone with the same diagnosis. However, no two people with the same diagnosis are the same, and no two stories of the one disease are ever the same. Don’t these differences matter? In homeopathic thinking they not only matter, they are the keys to finding the right remedies. People have taken on board the medical model of think-

ing to an extent, which can actually block them from being aware of the details of their own experience.

When I meet a patient for the first time, one of the first things I ask is “Tell me your story”, or “Tell me all about yourself and how you are.” Not untypically people will start with a statement of their disease. “I’ve got asthma” or “I’ve got endometriosis” or “I’m a diabetic”. When I ask them to say more, they might go on to list all the tests, drugs or procedures they’ve received and what other doctors have said. Conveying this information might take several minutes, and in that time, I get to know almost nothing about this person.

It can be a bit of a shock for them to hear me say that what interests me most is how they experience their asthma, or endometriosis or whatever. What is their experience? How does it affect them? What does it mean in their lives? What impact does it have? Sadly, patients are not accustomed to telling their stories in detail. They’ve been trained to stick to the labels. This can be so ingrained that it takes a bit of work to do it differently. However, becoming aware of your daily experience is the best way to learn, not only what makes you unique, but also what are the best ways for you to stay well, or become well.

Observing yourself

Try this exercise. Get yourself a notebook. It can be a cheap exercise book from the stationers, or a beautiful handmade book, or even a computer or PDA, whatever is your preference.

You are going to write down your observations of yourself in this notebook. What you write is only for you. Only you should decide whether or not to share any of it with anyone else. It can be useful to share these insights but it’s best if you write it for your eyes only. That way you won’t worry about other people’s thoughts or views and you’ll be freer to write what is true.

I suggest it is a book, which you carry with you everywhere for the next week. Write in it whenever you get a chance, but, at very least, write in it for about 15 minutes towards the end of every day.

What are you going to write? Any observations of you, your body, your feelings, your experiences today. Let’s consider the 15-minute end of day slot first. This is a time to reflect on the day just passed. Take a minute or two to sit quietly and replay the day like a video recording in your head. Start at the beginning and hit the fast forward button. Run the story of your day. Stop the tape at any point where something strikes you. If you are re-running the morning, the first thing which strikes you might be something that happened on the way to work, or when someone telephoned, or when you started on a particular task for the day. What strikes you about this particular event? Describe it in your book. What exactly

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was the event? What did you notice? What did you feel? What did you experience? Then fast forward to the next thing that strikes you. Anything which strikes you as “remarkable” is – make a remark about it!

Next let’s consider how you might use the book throughout the day. Well, it’s the same as the 15-minute end of day slot but focused on what is happening now, or what has just happened. It might be an event, it might be a strong feeling, it might be a physical sensation of some kind. Say, for example, you notice that you have a pain. Stop now and write it down. Where is that pain, exactly? What does it feel like? Do you feel any other sensations at the same time (nausea, lightheadedness, an itch, or whatever)? What were you doing when it began? What can you do to ease it a little? Is there anything you are doing which seems to make it worse? Just write it down. Capture the detail. Check out what your body is telling you. Inside, your defence systems and your healing systems are working all the time. They are trying to keep you healthy and to deal with any problems that occur. Become a bit more aware of these activities. At the deepest level, we know what is good for us and what is bad for us. We have learned to develop our own unique strategies for coping. If you want to understand what yours are, then you’ll have to become more aware of them.

Isn’t this going to turn me into a health-obsessed maniac? Well, it could do, if that’s the way you wish to go, but there is no reason why it should. Becoming more aware of your own patterns will help you find your own answers to many of life’s difficulties and, at the very least, give you the opportunities to make changes. You can’t choose to change if you don’t know what the current situation is. It’s like the old joke about asking the man “How would I get to Brownsville from here?” and getting the answer “Sure, if I was going to go to Brownsville I wouldn’t start from here.”

Well, here is the place to start. Get to know where you are. Then you’ll be able to choose where you want to go and figure out how to get there. Even if your observations don’t help you to see some new possible solutions



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for yourself (I think they will help you uncover some), knowing yourself and your reactions better will help a homeopath to find that elusive right remedy for you. Instead of sitting down and saying, “I’ve got x”, you’ll be able to tell your own, unique story.

Dr Bob Leckridge graduated from Edinburgh University in 1978 and worked as a GP until 1995 since when he has worked full-time as a Specialist in Homeopathic Medicine at Glasgow Homoeopathic Hospital. He teaches homeopathy internationally and is the author of *Homeopathy in Primary Care*. He became President of the Faculty of Homeopathy in 1998.

In the next article we’ll consider this issue of observation a little further. How can it help us to understand others? How can it help us to be better parents, or better spouses? How can it help us in our relationships with others? We’ll also begin to explore what homeopathy teaches us about how we get sick and about how illnesses develop. Then in the last of the series, we’ll look at what homeopathy teaches us about self-defence and self-healing.