

ORIGINAL PAPER

Conceptions of health, illness and treatment of patients who use homeopathy in Santos, Brazil

CM Patriani Justo^{1,*} and Mara H de Andrea Gomes¹

¹Universidade Federal de São Paulo—Escola Paulista de Medicina, Department of Preventive Medicine, 1341, Borges Lagoa Street, 04023-034 São Paulo, Brazil

Objective: To investigate the conceptions of health and illness, the reasons for seeking homeopathy and continuing treatment, compliance and the meaning of the relationship between religiosity and health for patients who adhere to homeopathy.

Methods: A qualitative study of 20 adult patients in Santos (Brazil) treated by homeopaths in the public and private sector for at least 2 years. Semi-structured interviews, organized by predefined thematic categories, the content of the interviews was analyzed.

Results: The conceptions of health and illness of the interviewed patients are related to the idea of vital balance/imbalance mediated by body–mind interaction. Dissatisfaction with conventional treatment, family influence and suggestions of others were the reasons for seeking homeopathic treatment. Patients continued homeopathic treatment due to positive therapeutic results, cure without being aggressive to the organism, the holistic integrated approach, the preventive nature of the treatment and low prices of medicine. For these patients, the availability of homeopathy in the public health sector extends the possibility of access. The need for a wider dissemination of homeopathy and the difficulties in following the prescription are the main problems involved in continuing treatment. Faith is an important component. We found a correlation between the conceptions of health and illness and the principles of homeopathy, assimilated through a strong bond between patients and the homeopathic practitioners.

Conclusion: To investigate the beliefs, values and meanings that patients attribute to homeopathy helps to understand subjective aspects that may interfere with treatment compliance. *Homeopathy* (2008) 97, 22–27.

Keywords: homeopathy; patient acceptance of health care; patient participation; qualitative research; primary health care; public health

Introduction

The homeopathic conception of illness and health emphasizes the meanings, beliefs and values that the patient attributes to the process of becoming ill, to understand the person who lives inside the sick person and not only the illness of the person. It considers the

individuality of the person who is sick, including the significance attributed to the disease. To prioritize the person as the centre, both in diagnosis and in treatment, leads the homeopathic doctor to respect the individual's experience of illness, increasing his participation in the process of recovery. To listen, pay attention and promote dialogue, are important aspects for the homeopathic doctor, in selecting the best homeopathic medicine. For the patient, it means that the doctor, besides making the right diagnosis and prescription, is also respectful and can listen.^{1,2}

Homeopathy stands out as being safe.^{3,4} With these characteristics, homeopathy can contribute to the construction of a model centered in health, not only

*Correspondence: Célia Maria Patriani Justo, Universidade Federal de São Paulo—Escola Paulista de Medicina, Department of Preventive Medicine, 1341, Borges Lagoa Street, 04023-034 São Paulo, Brazil.

E-mail: celiapatriani@uol.com.br

Received 25 September 2006; revised 21 March 2007; accepted 22 May 2007

in illness, placing the patient back at the center, understood in the physical, psychological and social dimensions.

The affective and symbolic elements present in the patients' relationship with the doctor and treatment results indicate the relevance of investigating the reasons, beliefs and values of these patients, allowing for a better understanding of the process of compliance with treatment and providing useful information for therapeutic practice. This paper aims at deepening our knowledge of the patients who use homeopathy, setting as categories of inquiry the conceptions of health and illness, the reasons for the seeking and continuing treatment and the relationship between religiosity and health.

Methods

This is a qualitative study on 20 adult patients, of both sexes resident in city of Santos (Brazil), between February and June 2005, treated by homeopaths in the public and private sectors for at least 2 years. To find these patients, we looked for doctors whose specialization course was accredited by the Brazilian Homeopathic Medical Association (BHMA), who had clinical experience of over 10 years and who prioritized the homeopathic medicines, which means not combining homeopathy with other practices. We selected 10 patients from public service (PS) and 10 from private doctors (PP).

The information was collected by semi-structured tape recorded interviews. Transcripts of the interviews were made shortly afterwards. In order to guarantee privacy and to create a situation of empathy, all the interviews were conducted at a place and time chosen by the interviewees. Interviewees completed an identification form. During the interviews, we allowed free speech, aiming to listen without directing the conversation. We used a field diary to record the additional comments.

The interviews were analyzed by the technique of the content via thematic categories,⁵ which were selected to target the objectives and previously inserted as open questions in the interviews:

- (1) In your opinion, what is associated with health?
- (2) In your opinion, why do people become sick?
- (3) How was your first contact with homeopathy?
- (4) What does homeopathy mean to you now?
- (5) What were the reasons which led you to continue homeopathic treatment?
- (6) Did you find any problem following homeopathic treatment?
- (7) Have you given up the treatment for a certain period of time?
- (8) Have you consulted another doctor?
- (9) In your opinion, is there any relationship between health and religious belief?

Questions Q1 and Q2, focused on understanding the conceptions of health and illness; Q3, the reasons for seeking homeopathic treatment and possible comparisons with conventional medicine; Q4 and Q5 identify the place of homeopathy in the set of beliefs and values of the patient; Q6, Q7 and Q8 investigate the difficulties in compliance and Q9 reflects the relationship between religiosity and health.

Results

Table 1 shows an overview of the interviewed persons regarding sex, age, education, duration of treatment and the main complaints. We found a majority of women (80%), average age of 58.5 years (37 to 80 years). Level of education showed social differences among the types of treatment, in the public sector we only found 1 patient with a university degree, while out of 10 patients in the private sector, 8 had a university degree.

Regarding the duration of homeopathic treatment, this was shorter for the patients with in the public sector. In the private sector, all patients had received homeopathy for at least 10 years, often with the same doctor. We found 4 patients with more than 20 years of homeopathic treatment, 2 public sector and 2 private sector. Those in the public sector have in common a family history tradition of homeopathy, with a history which includes medical treatment, treatment in spiritual centers, and self-treatment.

As far as main complaints are concerned, a wide variety of illnesses were treated with homeopathy, with osteoporosis being the most frequently mentioned by public sector patients, probably due to the program of prevention and treatment offered by this service.

Conceptions of health and illness

For these patients, health is associated with an idea of vital balance, of body-mind interaction, mediated by physical, psychological, social and spiritual factors. The dynamics between body and mind are also represented in the conceptions of illness—people get ill because they are sad, get depressed, cannot deal with problems, weaken the resistance of the organism, leading to a psychosomatization process that starts in the soul and comes out in the body. To illustrate:

'I think health is a set of factors, it must have the physical part linked to the mental part, to the spiritual part, all of this added to a certain accomplishment as a person (...) quality of life, personal, family and professional achievements, physical, mental and spiritual balance, it is a set of factors, our health is something which depends mainly on ourselves, but also on the context, it is an interaction of factors, but many things can influence it' (PP6);

Table 1 Patients treated by homeopathy according to sex, age, education, length of adhesion and the main complaints in treatment, in Santos, 2005

Patients	Sex	Age	Education (years)	Length of adhesion (years)	Main complaints in treatment
PS1	F	66	11-14	6-9	Osteoporosis
PS2	F	80	11-14	> 20	Osteoporosis; tiredness (heart); dizziness
PS3	F	37	11-14	6-9	Premenstrual syndrome; thyroid disorders
PS4	F	41	≥ 15	2-5	Rhinitis; anxiety; hypertension
PS5	F	76	1-3	10-13	Osteoporosis; arthritis
PS6	F	55	8-10	10-13	Osteoporosis; hypertension
PS7	F	72	8-10	2-5	Osteoporosis; thyroid disorders
PS8	F	65	4-7	2-5	Osteoporosis
PS9	F	54	11-14	2-5	Rhinitis; sinusitis
PS10	F	69	11-14	> 20	Osteoporosis; arthritis
PP1	F	53	≥ 15	14-20	Hypertension
PP2	F	77	11-14	> 20	Depression; insomnia; muscle pain (myalgia)
PP3	M	54	≥ 15	14-20	Uric acid control (gout)
PP4	M	65	≥ 15	14-20	Sinusitis; skin allergy
PP5	M	39	≥ 15	14-20	Hepatitis control
PP6	F	44	≥ 15	14-20	Uterine growths (fibroids); anxiety
PP7	F	43	≥ 15	10-13	Uterine growths; premenstrual syndrome; anxiety
PP8	M	52	≥ 15	14-20	Gastritis; megrim
PP9	F	76	8-10	> 20	Nervousness
PP10	F	52	≥ 15	14-20	Skin allergy; influenza

PS—public service; PP—private service.

'At first I think they get emotionally ill. I believe in (...)sadness, loss, hidden suffering that the person couldn't overcome (...) and that becomes accumulated then at a certain moment (...) high blood pressure, diabetes will arise. I think it's all deeply related to the emotional side (...) I think this must be researched, what a person is feeling deep in their soul, what they have been feeling for a while'. (PS4)

Why did the patients seek homeopathy?

The categories related to the reasons that led patients to look for homeopathy are: dissatisfaction with the results of conventional treatment, family influence and suggestions of others.

Dissatisfaction with the results and the harmful effects of allopathic remedies are significant elements in the process of adhering to homeopathic treatment, as we can observe in these narratives:

'My first contact with homeopathy was because of my youngest son (...) we tried with the pediatrician to solve the problem many times, but we were not getting any results. He was very tiny, almost newborn, and allopathic remedies are very strong, they attacked very much his body and everything (...). Through this, we all at home, my oldest son, my wife and I, got to know homeopathy better (...) we could see the advantages of the treatment through it, ok? And so everybody at home began to take this direction' (PP3);

'I had a throat problem, almost an anaphylactic shock, took a remedy that made me feel very sick, I went to the hospital (...) I am also from a family of doctors, although my uncle is a surgeon, he was in favour of homeopathy and told my mother (...) I went to a homeopathic doctor and started the treatment with him and after that I never gave up'. (PP5)

The reports of the patients who have been treated with homeopathy since they were children are associated with the family tradition of using homeopathic treatment, which started with the parents, grandparents or relatives and continues with their children and grandchildren:

'I used to take it when I was a kid, my grandmother used to give me homeopathic remedies, I can remember that very well. I remember if a child had something, they gave him homeopathic remedies, my grandmother was diabetic, she died in 1933 and she used to take homeopathic remedies (...) so I have known about homeopathy for a long time'. (PS2)

The patients also searched for homeopathy by suggestion of friends, neighbors and people with whom they worked:

'I had a friend who treated herself with homeopathy and she always talked to me (...) go for it, homeopathy is so good and besides this one there is another friend who treats herself with it until today (...) she is 79, she is a very smart person, she only treats herself with homeopathy, so I said to myself: That's it! I'm going to look for it (...) and it was good to me'. (PS5)

Continuing treatment

Analysis of the interviews allowed us to build five categories, from which we could better understand aspects relevant to continuing treatment:

1. Homeopathy promotes well being and has positive results. The positive results experienced during the treatment motivate the patients to go on, as "they can feel" that homeopathy works. It is a treatment which either promotes cure or at least stabilizes the illness, making them believe in this therapeutics:

'The positive result, if the effect had not been positive, I would have already given up, but I think it works, so that's why I continue (...) I think that it works, I use it because I have already felt that it works, I believe it is valid'. (PP2)

2. Homeopathic treatment cures without attacking the organism. The medicine stands out for being safe, for curing without harming the organism or causing any collateral effects, while allopathic medicines are very strong, violent, toxic and cause other problems besides the illness itself:

'I am so used to homeopathy that I just can't take allopathic medicines (...) my organism doesn't adapt to allopathy anymore (...) because homeopathy doesn't have any side effects, it's something that makes you feel, while allopathy cures one thing it harms another one (PP10)';

'I can see that conventional medicine (...) treats at a certain moment and many times doesn't work (...) that the organism is so weak and the drug is so strong that instead of making you feel better, it can harm your body, so in my opinion, homeopathy treats and leaves us in a more balanced way, it even cleans your organism'. (PS6)

3. Treatments with a total vision of the patient. Being understood as "a person as a whole" and not as a "piece". The homeopathic doctor is concerned with the person that the patient is; not only with the illness of the patient, he knows how to listen, he makes room for dialogue and is really interested in the context of the patient's life. It is not only a treatment involving medicines. Homeopathy is considered a philosophy of life because it helps to think about behaviors and habits, intervening in the way they see life and face their problems:

'I like very much to be seen as a whole, as a human being, an entire person and not only a piece of it (...) the relationship with the doctor (...) someone who will understand that difficulty, that situation, that will not put a label on people, I think human beings must be seen in a bigger, more comprehensive, more integrated way (...) even what was spoken before, what causes our illnesses, many causes are in our souls, or emotions. Allopathy disregards all of these things (PP6)';

'It is a resource, a great resource which we can make available, if you go deeper, it can also be a philosophy of how to face life and problems, which brings not only the hope for a physical cure, but gives you more emotional, spiritual things'. (PP8)

4. Homeopathy is preventive. For these patients, homeopathy was also perceived as a preventive treatment: it helps to avoid illnesses, makes the organism stronger, more resistant to illnesses:

'It also helps to avoid illnesses, or prevent us from becoming ill, it meets our conception of nature and that the organism must be strengthened'. (PP4)

5. The price of the medicine is affordable. The relatively low price of homeopathy facilitates the process of patients continuing treatment:

'It is a medication that has a low price compared to medication from a normal pharmacy, an allopathic medicine. I think it can reach all social classes, it is a lasting and efficient medication'. (PS3)

Obstacles to homeopathic treatment

The problems and obstacles related to continuing treatment reported by these patients are: difficulty in filling the prescription, pressure from others and lack of homeopathic services.

Some patients said it was difficult to follow the prescription, as the regime is difficult, especially in severe cases, where the regime demands discipline and patience:

'It is just as I told you, when there are crises, in the cases of children that have some severe health problem, the kind you have to start with medication every half an hour, every hour, then you've got to have persistence, haven't you? But we know it's all for the best, so we have got to have patience'. (PS3)

No patient in this cohort gave up homeopathic treatment. However, in some situations it is not easy to overcome the "social pressures" against homeopathy:

'For a person who is starting with homeopathic remedies (...) it is very difficult to overcome the social pressure, moreover because we live with a culture of medicines. (...) when you change, when you want that, you face pressures (...) or even when you have a baby who was born recently, you are insecure, suddenly your mother says: but is he going to get a temperature? So, you have to overcome these questions and believe in this process of body strengthening, to believe we have the resources (...) I've seen people give up (...) but I think that's the way it is, it's a little difficult.' (PP7)

Public sector patients consider homeopathy needs to become more widely known, are interested in knowing more about the action of homeopathic remedies. Some patients consider that the situation is becoming more favorable, because there are more openings to homeopathy, including in the universities. But, others consider that the controversies around the scientific evidence promoted by the media creates confusion and harm its name, evidencing possible conflicts of interest with the pharmaceutical industry.

Religiosity and health

The patients interviewed considered that there is a strong relationship between health and faith. Religious belief is an important instrument to face disease; it provides balance, force and hope. They point to a positive synergy between faith and treatment, in an association that can lead to a faster recovery:

'I think you must believe you are going to get well, you will be better because if you take the medicine but remain pessimistic, you can't help yourself. If you are optimistic, faith in whatever you believe, I think you have to react, because if you don't have faith you give up and I believe we are able to react, even the remedies have a faster effect when you have hope and you believe in it'. (PS10)

Discussion

In mental representations of these uses of homeopathy about the relationship between health-illness, health is considered synonymous with emotional and organic balance, while illness is the disruption of this balance due to different factors which are associated with the patient's life style. Feelings, behaviors, habits and attitudes are considered significant elements which influence the process of becoming ill, evidencing a homology with the conceptions of homeopathic practitioners.

We verified that patients from the public and private sectors share similar conceptions, summarized in the mind-body interaction, with emphasis on the influence of emotions over the organism, in the determination of the disease as well as in recovery or the maintenance of health. In this respect, we agree with the hypothesis suggested by Luz,⁶ who says there an adjustment between medical rationality and the conceptions of doctors and patients, conceptions shared in the therapeutic relationship.

Most of the interviewees sought homeopathy after a previous disappointment with allopathic medicine. The comparison between allopathic and homeopathic practice constitutes a remarkable characteristic of these patients, they evaluated the practices and the strategies adopted, in terms of health and illness. For these patients, homeopathy is defined as the medicine that 'does not do any harm' in contrast to allopathy, which also cures but intoxicates and presents collateral effects.⁷

A study on perception and behavior of the patients in the public sector showed that the belief that homeopathic remedies to cure without harming the health was the main reason for the demand for this treatment. For these patients, homeopathy is a treatment that presents good results, and is considered a therapeutic option for the whole population.⁸

Dissatisfaction with the results of conventional treatment was the main reason for these patients to

seek homeopathy. The ineffectiveness of conventional treatment for complaints presented by these patients can be understood because mostly they are associated with chronic illnesses.^{9 11} Patients with psychiatric disorders with little prospect of cure or without detectable pathology in examinations, seek homeopathy, due because all symptoms make sense if they are considered as early stages of a process before the organic manifestation.

Adhering to any form of therapy involves meanings, beliefs and values of the patients, attributes that are reflected in the demand, continuity and persistence with the chosen treatment. In our research, the positive results provided by the homeopathic treatment; the fact that it cures without harm; the therapeutics that understands the patient as "a whole person and not as a piece"; preventive treatment; and price are the main reported aspects which explain compliance to homeopathy.

Similarly, other studies have showed that for the patients who use homeopathy, what they liked most in the treatment is the attention of the doctor, the positive and lasting result and the medication that is natural and does not harm the organism.^{12 14} Concern about the adverse effects of conventional medicines is an important aspect in seeking and continuing homeopathic treatment. In the discourse of our interviewees, the relative safety of homeopathic treatment is important and strengthened by negative experiences of allopathic medicines. Homeopathy is considered more beneficial as the remedies are largely free of adverse effects and cure without damaging the health.

The price of the medicine was quite prominent for the interviewed patients as being more accessible than those conventional medicines. This was particularly important for the public sector patients.

In terms of the relationship with the doctor, the interviewed patients mentioned the longer time available in the consultation, the empathy assumed of the doctor, the ability to listen, talk and share decisions. Patients' satisfaction with the treatment is influenced particularly by the interactive nature of the relationship. This interaction goes beyond the technical approach which tends to ignore subjective elements of illness. Empathy improves the therapeutic relationship, as it enables patients to feel comfortable to speak about their concerns, facilitating understanding and facing illness.¹⁵

We consider that the bond of the patients with homeopathy is strengthened by its recognized medicinal effectiveness but not explained by it. Homeopathy constitutes, at the symbolic level, a set of beliefs and values influences the way patients face life, when they report it as part of their "philosophy of life", that not only supplies a proper way to see the manifestation of the illness, but helps to think about habits and behaviors.

The compliance to homeopathy is not without obstacles and difficulties including difficulties in

following the regime: attention, discipline and patience are necessary. This is a question that requires further investigation with patients who have abandoned treatment. Despite the efforts of homeopathic professionals, the lack of widespread knowledge about homeopathy is emphasized by public sector patients as a difficulty.

The considerations of the patients interviewed about the relationship between religiosity and health lead us to believe that having faith (and the properties associated to it: strength, courage, hope and comfort in the suffering) is an important factor of adherence and continuity to any treatment, homeopathic or other.

Conclusion

To investigate beliefs, values and meanings that homeopathy patients attribute to it, through the analysis of the content of interviews and with the support of techniques of the qualitative methodology, allowed us to understand the relevance of subjective aspects in the process of compliance to treatment, homeopathic or not.

In the perspective of knowledge complementarity, this may offer insights into other practices and interventions concerned with extending the understanding of the complex relationship between health and illness.

References

- 1 Furnham A, Smith C. Choosing alternative medicine: a comparison of the beliefs of patients visiting a general practitioner and a homeopath. *Soc Sci Med* 1988; **26**(7): 685-689.
- 2 Araújo EC. *O Processo terapêutico da medicina homeopática: o papel estratégico da relação médico-paciente* tese. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2001.
- 3 Dantas F, Rampes H. Do homeopathic medicines provoke adverse effects? A systematic review. *Br Homeopath J* 2000; **89**(suppl 1): 35-38.
- 4 Endrizzi C, Rossi E, Crudeli L, Garibaldi D. Harm in homeopathy: aggravations, adverse drug events or medication errors? *Homp* 2005; **94**: 233-240.
- 5 Bardin L. *Análise de conteúdo*. Traduzido por Reto LA e Pinheiro A. Lisboa: Edições, 1979; **70**: 93-154.
- 6 Luz MT. *Comparação de representações de corpo, saúde, doença e tratamento em pacientes e terapeutas de homeopatia, acupuntura e biomedicina*. Rio de Janeiro: UERJ/IMS; 1998 Série Estudos em Saúde Coletiva, 167.
- 7 Loyola MA. *Estudo antropológico da prática homeopática no Rio de Janeiro, 1983-1985: a clientela*. In: Luz MT (ed.). *Textos de apoio: a questão da homeopatia*. Rio de Janeiro: PEC/ ENSP/ABRASCO; 1987, pp. 63-78.
- 8 Mendicelli VLSL. *Homeopatia: percepção e conduta de clientela de postos de saúde* tese. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 1994.
- 9 Jacobs J, Crothers D. Who sees homeopaths? A study of patient characteristics in a homeopathic family practice. *Br Homeopath J* 1991; **80**(1): 57-58.
- 10 Jacobs J, Chapman EH, Crothers D. Patient characteristics and practice patterns of physicians using homeopathy. *Arch Fam Med* 1998; **7**(6): 537-540.
- 11 Vincent C, Furnham A. Why do patients turn to complementary medicine? An empirical study. *Br J Clin Psychol* 1996; **35**(Pt 1): 37-48.
- 12 Luz MT. V. *Seminário do projeto racionalidades médicas*. Rio de Janeiro: UERJ/IMS; 1996 b Série Estudos em Saúde Coletiva, 136.
- 13 Moreira Neto G. *Homeopatia em Unidade Básica de Saúde (UBS): um espaço possível* tese. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 1999.
- 14 Moreira Neto G. *Homeopatia em Unidade Básica de Saúde: um espaço possível*. *Rev Homeopatia (São Paulo)* 2001; **66**(1): 5-26.
- 15 Mercer SW, Reilly D. A qualitative study of patient's views on the consultation at the Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital, an NHS integrative complementary and orthodox medical care unit. *Patient Educ Couns* 2004; **53**(1): 13-18.