

ORIGINAL PAPER

Changes in patients visiting a homeopathic clinic in Norway from 1994 to 2004

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Aim: There are a few examining changes in patient groups seeking homeopathic care. This study describes changes in complaints and characteristics of patients visiting a homeopathic clinic in Norway from 1994/1995 to 2003/2004.

Methods: Two surveys were conducted, each including data for 700 patients who had visited the same homeopathic clinic, with five (1995) and seven (2004) homeopaths, respectively. Data on patients' gender, age, occupation, reason for encounter and where they had heard about homeopathy and the homeopathic clinic were registered by the homeopaths. In 2004, the patients also answered questions on the previous use of conventional treatment and how long it took them to decide to consult a homeopath.

Results: There are no changes in the reason for encounter and gender proportions between 1995 and 2004. Over 36% of patients were under the age of 16 in 2004, compared to 26% in 1995. Most patients still consult homeopaths through a lay referral network. In 2004, more than 60% made an appointment with a homeopath within the first month of first considering it.

Conclusion: There are few changes in the characteristics of this homeopathic patient population. There is a need for studies that explore the 'why question'; Why an increasing percentage of patients are children? Why people with higher education and why certain age groups visit homeopaths more frequently than others? *Homeopathy* (2005) 94, 222-228.

Keywords: homeopathy; referral system; children; respiratory diseases; skin diseases; psychological complaints

Introduction

Homeopathy is the most frequently used complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in Norway.¹ A total of 37% of the population have used homeopathy at some point of time and the use has increased over the past decades.² A new law relating to the alternative treatment of disease was introduced on 1 January 2004.³ The objective is to contribute to the safety of patients who seek or receive alternative

treatment and to regulate the right to practice such treatment. This law established a public register for CAM practitioners.⁴ The aim of the voluntary register of CAM practitioners is to help ensure patient safety and consumer rights for those seeking a registered practitioner. Homeopaths are the first practitioners to be accepted onto the register. The association representing homeopaths in Norway, Norske Homeopater Landsforbund (NHL, www.nhl.no), has applied for homeopaths to become statutorily regulated healthcare practitioners.¹

There is a need to provide documentary information on what homeopaths do. This will provide information to the public in making an informed choice in healthcare; for healthcare practitioners so that they may cooperate more easily with homeopaths; for the

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Received 21 February 2005; revised 20 May 2005; accepted 15 August 2005

authorities so that they have the information to make decisions concerning recognition of homeopaths, and for homeopaths to learn more about their own practice. Surveys have previously looked at characteristics of patients consulting homeopaths in private practice in Norway^{5, 10} and other countries.¹¹⁻²³ None of these have looked at changes in patient characteristics over time. Furthermore, no surveys have looked at the time it takes for patients to take the decision to consult a homeopath.

The aim of this study is to describe changes in complaints and characteristics of patients visiting a homeopathic clinic in Western Norway from 1994/1995 to 2003/2004 and how much time it takes for patients to take the decision to consult a homeopath. We will present results from the study in 2003/2004, and compare these results with the results of a previous study from 1994/1995.⁵ Some data not reported in the previous publication have been reported in this article.

Material and methods

Two similar surveys were conducted at the same homeopathic clinic in 1994 and 1995, and 2003 and 2004. The clinic is situated in Stavanger on the West Coast of Norway, a city of 100 000 inhabitants (250 000 including surrounding areas). In 1994/95, five homeopaths worked at the clinic and in 2003/04, seven. All homeopaths are members of Norske Homeopaters Landsforbund, and have been accepted into the Voluntary Register for Alternative Practitioners. All practitioners at the clinic practise 'classical homeopathy', ie they only prescribe one homeopathic remedy at a time. The clinic advertises in the yellow pages (one large advertisement) and has a homepage on the internet.

All patients who visited the clinic for the first time or more than 2 years had elapsed since their previous visit (so that a full first consultation interview was taken (1.5h)) were included in the survey. The following information was recorded for each patient in both surveys: age (only in groups in 1994/95); gender; main complaint (up to three complaints could be registered); where the patient (or for children, their parent(s)) had heard about homeopathy and the clinic. In the 2004 survey, occupation and the question whether the patient had been to see a general practitioner for the complaint(s) and the number of days from the first time the patient considered consulting with a homeopath to the day they made the appointment were also registered.

Each practitioner collected data for each of their patients on a paper form during the first consultation. Data was transferred into a spreadsheet by the secretary. All data entries were checked by the first author. Complaints were coded according to the International Classification of Primary Care (ICPC)²³ in the 2004 survey. Headings in the Merck Manual²⁴

were used to code patients' complaints in the 1995 survey. Occupation was coded according to the official Norwegian classification (NOS C 521)²⁵, accessible online at Statistics Norway (www.ssb.no) in the 2004 survey. In the 1994/95 survey 700 patients were registered.⁵ It was therefore decided to include the same number in the 2003/04 survey to ease comparison. Frequency distribution is used to describe the data. Statistical testing was performed using the χ^2 test.²⁶ Missing data account for the slightly differing numbers in the text and tables.

Results

A total of 700 consecutive patients were included in each of the two surveys. All patients participated, but data are missing for some questions due to homeopaths forgetting to ask.

Age and gender

In 2004, the mean age was 26.3 years (Figure 1), with 28.3 years for female patients and 22.8 years for male patients. The largest age group was patients below ten, with 206 (29.5%) patients (Figure 2). A total of 255 (36.4%) were under 16 years of age in 2004, compared to 184 (26.3%) in 1995 ($P < 0.001$).

There were 447 (63.9%) female and 253 (36.1%) male patients (Figure 2) in 2004, compared to 60.3% female and 39.7% male patients in 1995 ($P = 0.186$). For patients from 18 years and above 72.4% were female and 27.6% male in 2004.

Complaints

In 2004, a total of 1173 complaints were registered for the 700 patients, giving an average of 1.68 complaints per patient (Table 1). The three largest groups of complaints were respiratory (20.5%), skin (15.0%) and psychological (11.3%). Respiratory complaints were primarily upper respiratory tract infections (more than one-third of respiratory complaints), either generalised or in more specific areas such as sinuses or throat; and allergic conditions. Seventy-six

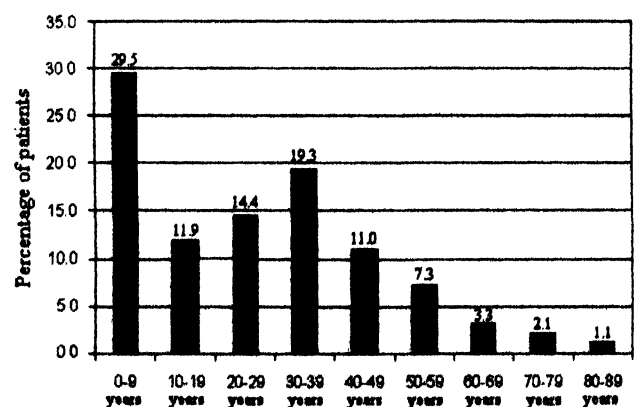


Figure 1. Distribution of the patients age in the 2004 survey. (percentage)

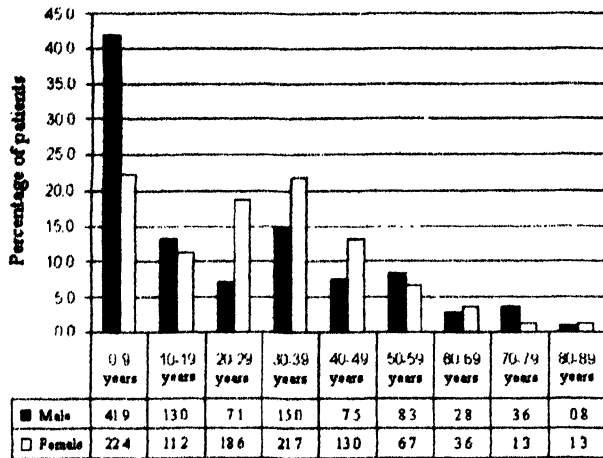


Figure 2. Distribution of the age for male and female patients in the 2004 survey. (percentage)

Table 1 Reasons for encounter in homeopathic practice in 2003/2004¹

	Number of complaints	Percentage of complaints
A: General	132	11.3
B: Blood	5	0.4
D: Digestive	101	8.6
F: Eye	19	1.6
H: Ear	75	6.4
K: Cardio-vascular	14	1.2
L: Musculo-skeletal	91	7.8
N: Neurological	66	5.6
P: Psychological	133	11.3
R: Respiratory	240	20.5
S: Skin	176	15.0
T: Metabolic, endocrine, nutritional	27	2.3
U: Urinary	25	2.1
W: Pregnancy, childbirth	22	1.9
X: Female genitalia	39	3.3
Y: Male genitalia	7	0.6
Z: Social	1	0.1
Total	1173	100.0

¹Reasons for encounter for patients are coded using ICPC groups.

per cent of ear complaints were either glue ear or infectious; recurring or chronic otitis media. Respiratory and ear problems together comprise 26.9% of all complaints.

Skin complaints were primarily eruptions or itching (63% of all skin complaints), of which more than half were eczema (36.4% of all skin complaints). Ten per cent (17 patients) had either warts or molluscum contagiosum.

For the age group below 10, respiratory complaints covered 43.7%, 27.2% ear complaints and 24.8% skin complaints. In this age group, 70% suffered from one or more of these complaints.

Psychological complaints were mainly sleeping difficulties, depressive states, anxiety, or learning and behavioural difficulties, which in all covered 74.4% of psychological complaints (22.6%, 19.5%, 18.0%, and 14.3% respectively).

Table 2 Comparison of reason for encounter in homeopathic practice in 2003/2004 and 1994/1995. ¹All figures are presented in percentages of total number of complaints

	2004: N = 1173	1995: N = 823
A: General	11.3	11.7
B: Blood	0.4	0.4
D: Digestive	8.6	7.3
F: Eye	1.6	1.0
K: Cardio-vascular	1.2	1.1
L: Musculo-skeletal	7.8	8.5
N: Neurological	5.6	5.8
P: Psychological	11.3	9.1
R,H: Respiratory/Ear ²	26.9	26.0
S: Skin	15.0	15.6
T: Metabolic, endocrine, nutritional	2.3	2.2
U,W,X,Y: Urinary, genitalia ³	7.9	6.4
Z: Social	0.1	0.0
Infection ⁴	0.0	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0

¹Reasons for encounter for patients are coded using ICPC groups for patients' in 2003/2004, and for patients in 1994/1995 according to chapters in Merck Manual.

²Includes ICPC category R and H as the Merck Manual includes ear under 'ear, nose and throat'.

³Includes ICPC categories U, W, X and Y, as these have been listed as genito/urinary, gynaecological and sexual in the 1995 survey.

⁴These conditions have in the 2004 survey been registered according to the appropriate ICPC group.

Seven patients reported malignant diseases, including leukaemia and tumours in the digestive system, the skin, female genitalia and the prostate gland. All seven patients had seen a doctor for their complaints.

Comparing figures for 2004 and 1995 shows that there are only minor differences in the proportion of patients for most disease groups (Table 2) ($P = 0.880$). There has been an increase in psychological complaints from 9.1% in 1995 to 11.3% in 2004, but the difference is not statistically significant ($P = 0.129$).

Treatment and clinic choice

A total of 479 patients (68%) in 2004 reported they decided to try homeopathic treatment because it had been recommended by other patients or someone they know (Table 3). This is similar to the situation in 1995, where the percentage was 66. Also, 139 (20%) patients in 2004 had previously visited a homeopath. These two categories added up to a total of 582 patients (82%), but patients could give more than one reason. Alternative practitioners recommended homeopathy to 7% of the patients. Eight per cent had read about homeopathy in the media.

A total of 407 (58%) decided to consult with a homeopath at Stavanger Homeopati Senter after a recommendation by another patient or someone they know. Twelve per cent had previously attended this clinic. Five per cent had been recommended by a healthcare practitioner to consult a homeopath at this

Table 3 Why patients decided to try homeopathic treatment and why they decided to consult with a homeopath at Stavanger Homeopati Senter in 2004 and 1995 (Percentages)

Reason	Homeopathic treatment		Stavanger Homeopati Senter	
	2004	1995	2004	1995
Recommended by other patient, or acquaintance	68	66	55	55
Recommended by healthcare practitioner	4	1	5	2
Recommended by alternative practitioner	7	3	8	4a
Media	8	9	7	4
Advertisement	2	0	19	13
Previously treated	20	13	12	14
Other	6	4	3	4
Sum	100	100	100	100

Table 4 Patients' occupation in 2004

Occupation ¹	Number of patients		Percentage of patients	
	SHS, N = 308	SHS	Norway	
Administrative executives and politicians	24	7.8	7.2	
Academic professions (more than 4 year higher education)	56	18.2	11.7	
Professions with shorter higher education (3 years or less)	102	33.1	23.3	
Office (clerical) and customer service	30	9.7	7.5	
Sales, service and care	46	14.9	22.9	
Farming, forestry and fishing	5	1.6	3.0	
Craftsmen/manufacturing etc	17	5.5	11.1	
Transport, communication and machine operators	8	2.6	7.3	
Other	20	6.5	5.9	
Total	308	100	100	

The *P*-value calculated by χ^2 for Table 4 is <0.001.

¹The remaining adult patients are divided into students (69), housework (27), disabled (11), retired (33) and unemployed (3).

particular clinic, half by a medical doctor. For 5.6% another homeopath had advised the patient to contact this clinic. Nineteen per cent found the clinic through advertisements, in 89.5% of the cases (17% of all patients) through the yellow pages. Most of the patients (70.5%) who found the clinic through the yellow pages stated that they had seen the clinic's advertisement.

Occupation, previous consultations, time to reach decision

In all, 68.3% (308) of patients over the age of 16 were employed. Out of these 158 (51.3%) had occupations that require university or other higher education (Table 4). This includes professions such as teachers, nurses, technical and civil engineers. The percentage of employed persons in the general population having university or other higher education is 35 and this is a significant difference compared to patients treated at the clinic in 2004 (*P*<0.001). 7.8% were statutorily recognised healthcare practitioners, and 15.3% of all employed patients were 'health care and social personnel'.

In 2004, 76% had consulted a GP previously for the complaint they consulted the homeopath for. Table 4 shows the distribution of previous consultations with GPs for each disease category (*P*<0.001). Patients were most likely to have visited a general practitioner

Table 5 Percentage of patients who have previously visited a GP for each disease category in homeopathic practice in 2004

ICPC code	Number of patients	Percentage of patients who have previously visited a GP
A: General	132	64
B: Blood	5	100
D: Digestive	101	72
F: Eye	19	84
H: Ear	75	84
K: Cardio-vascular	14	86
L: Musculo-skeletal	91	86
N: Neurological	66	82
P: Psychological	133	59
R: Respiratory	240	85
S: Skin	176	74
T: Metabolic, endocrine, nutritional	27	78
U: Urinary	25	96
W: Pregnancy, childbirth	22	82
X: Female genitalia	39	77
Y: Male genitalia	6	100
Z: Social	1	0
Total	1172	76

prior to the first consultation with the homeopath when they had complaints of the blood, male genitalia, urinary, cardio-vascular and musculoskeletal system (ranging from 86% to 100% of patients). They were

least likely to have consulted a GP for psychological complaints (59% of patients) (Table 5).

The average number of days from when patients first thought of consulting with a homeopath to the day when they made the appointment was 119 (or 4 months, range 0 days to 10 years) (Table 5). More than 60% of all patients made the appointment within 1 month, of these 126 (18.6%) made the appointment the same day and 264 (39.1%) made the appointment within a week. For 83 (12.3%) it took more than 6 months before they made the first appointment.

Discussion

Strengths and limitations

The strength of the surveys was that registration was consecutive. The outcome therefore gives a real world picture. The fact that patients were registered twice in the same clinic within a 10 year period gives a possibility to evaluate changes in a specific geographical area over time. The generalisability of the results is limited as the survey only covers one clinic. The use of different coding systems to classify complaints might influence the comparability of the two surveys, but as the comparison is only done on group level, this potential bias is expected to be minor.

Age and gender

There has been a significant increase in the proportion of children consulting homeopaths at this clinic. This is in line with results from a previous Norwegian survey which found an increase from 10% in 1985 to 25% in 1998.⁶ The same study found that one in four of all patients visiting homeopaths in Norway are below 10 years of age and in our survey this proportion is increased to nearly one in three. The percentage of children is higher in our survey compared to some surveys in other countries, which showed a percentage of children ranging from 8 to 26^{12,14,16}, but similar to two other surveys.^{17,18} There was no change in the male/female ratio. This could be due to this ratio being equal to the health seeking behaviour in the general population. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the male/female ratio in our surveys is the same as that in Norwegian general practice.²⁷ Previous surveys, in Norway and in other countries have also shown a predominance of female patients, ranging from 64% to 80%.^{7,16,21}

Complaints

There are no significant changes in the type of complaints for which patients consult homeopaths from 1995 to 2004. Furthermore there are no major differences in our surveys compared to a larger survey carried out in Norway in 1998.⁶ Changes in type of complaints could have been expected considering the percentage of children has increased significantly over

the 10 year period. The lack of change in types of complaints could be due to just looking at groups of diseases (organ systems). We would expect to find more differences had we compared specific conditions.

The most common reason for encounter in our survey was respiratory complaints with one-quarter of all patients. We did not find any significant changes in these figures compared to the survey carried out in 1995. The percentage of patients suffering from respiratory complaints are higher in our study compared to Norwegian surveys published in 1983⁹, 1985⁸ and 1992⁷ but similar to a survey published in 2003.⁶ Surveys carried out in other countries have also shown that respiratory complaints are among the most common complaints for which homeopaths are consulted.^{13,15,19,22} Possible reasons might be that patients are dissatisfied with conventional treatment for these complaints or that patients more frequently believe that homeopathy may serve as an alternative in these complaints. It might also be that they have been recommended from other patients who have been satisfied with the results, as our survey shows that patients in general decide to try homeopathy after having heard about it from others. Skin complaints were more common in our survey compared to most other surveys.^{8,9,11,17,19,21} We found only three surveys in other countries where skin problems were equally or more common,^{12,20,22} but another two Norwegian surveys that showed results similar to ours.^{6,7} This could indicate that Norwegian homeopaths have become more known to treat these complaints effectively.

Reasons for choice of homeopathy

Most patients seek homeopathic treatment because they have been recommended to do so by someone else, and this did not change from 1995 to 2004. Our figures also correspond with previous surveys which show that from 53% to 88% chose homeopathy because someone else recommended them to do so.^{7,8,11,15,18,19} This can be taken as an indication that the lay referral system is still the main reason for patients to consult with a homeopath.

Four per cent had been advised to try homeopathy by healthcare practitioners. Although this is an increase from 1.3% in 1995, it is still a low percentage. A possible reason is that Norwegian GPs and other healthcare practitioners do not believe in homeopathic treatment. Another reason may be that they are poorly informed about homeopathy. One-third of Norwegian medical doctors claim to have some knowledge about homeopathy.²⁸ Improved cooperation may be stimulated by the fact that 80% of Norwegian medical doctors believe they should have some knowledge about the most significant alternative therapies.²⁸ Improved cooperation is also supported by the finding that 51% of medical doctors thought homeopathy could be useful for one or several specific conditions.²⁹

The number of patients who had previously tried homeopathic treatment increased from 1995 to 2004. This is an expected development considering that nearly 40% of the adult population has been to see a homeopath. Nevertheless, a high proportion of patients are new to homeopathic treatment.

Occupation

A substantially higher proportion of the homeopathic patients had university or other higher education compared to the average population.³⁰ Other surveys have shown that a large percentage of patients have higher education, but the percentages are not as high as in our survey.^{11,15,19} Our figures are also higher than a previous Norwegian survey.⁸ A possible reason for homeopathic patients having a higher educational level than the population average may be that patients consulting homeopaths are better informed about homeopathy. Another possibility is that they feel more confident with healthcare options outside the public healthcare system. A third possibility is economic: patients with lower education earn less and cannot afford treatment. For future surveys it would be interesting to look at occupation of parents who choose homeopathy for their children, in order to determine whether there are any differences compared to adults who seek help for their own health problems.

Previous consultations with GPs

More than three-quarters of all patients had previously consulted a general practitioner (GP) for the problem for which they were seeking homeopathic treatment. It may be argued that cooperation between homeopaths and GPs should be encouraged, both to follow-up patients from a medical point of view, and especially for the 24% of patients who did not see a GP prior to homeopathic treatment. Homeopaths at this clinic frequently refer patients to GPs. Patients are least likely to have consulted a medical doctor if they had psychological complaints (59%). A possible reason may be that patients lack confidence that their GP can do anything to help them with conditions such as depression and anxieties, or to a larger degree than for other complaints, the patients did not want to take conventional drugs.

Time to make a decision

As many as 60% of all patients make up their mind to consult a homeopath within the first month. It must be pointed out that homeopaths in the survey found it difficult to get precise responses to this question, as many patients were not completely sure of their estimate, especially when it had been a while since they made up their mind. Nevertheless, it seems fair to conclude that a relatively small proportion of homeopathic patients consult for the first time for acute complaints. Another aspect is that quite a large

proportion of patients seem to take some time to 'mature' before they make the appointment.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that there are few changes in the characteristics of the homeopathic patient population. There is a need for studies that explore the 'why question', eg why an increasing percentage of patients are children, why people with higher education and why certain age groups visit homeopaths more frequently than other groups.

Acknowledgements

We thank the homeopaths at the clinic who participated in the project. A special thanks to Helene Marie Berg for data entry.

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