

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL

20 years ago: *The British Homoeopathic Journal*, July 1988

ST Land*

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Editorial

Time for a mature attitude, or a storm in a tasse à thé

Peter Fisher's editorial is concerned with antipathy toward homeopathy, and it is the theme of much of this issue of the *Journal*. A storm developed in the French popular and medical press following the publication in the *Lancet* of a trial of *Opium* and *Raphanus* for post-operative ileus which had negative results. As a survey showed homeopathy to be the most popular complementary therapy in France, and that 43% of young doctors believed it to have a specific pharmacodynamic action, the ferocity of the attack was not surprising. The author wondered if this might be the shape of things to come in Britain. Although the British press was generally supportive, especially when a recent BMA report had attacked all complementary therapy, he thought this could not be relied upon.

It was notable that the homeopathic community was under government pressure to participate in the study. In 1985, the French government had established GRECHO, a body to evaluate homeopathy, with the threat that social security reimbursement of homeopathic prescriptions would be cut if they did not cooperate. Prophetically, Fisher stated that parallel developments might occur in the future in Great Britain and other countries. He then discussed the importance of accepting negative results; especially in the face of unfortunate personal attacks from homeopaths themselves, as happened in the trial of *Rhus tox 6x*, in which their colleagues had collaborated in good faith.¹

Research abstract

Opium and Raphanus in ileus

After giving an abstract of the paper referred to above, Peter Fisher discussed lessons to be learnt from the negative result. The choice of model was determined too much by expediency; the principle of individualization was aban-

doned; and the staff who administered the treatments were not familiar with, and perhaps sceptical about, homeopathy. The 10 authors, including some well-known in the homeopathic world as well as prominent academics, referred to the infrequency of use of 'specific and standard homeopathic treatments'.

Fisher said it was regrettable that the doctors who collaborated found themselves attacked by colleagues for having done so. He stressed that the main problems confronting us in proving the efficacy of our remarkable and effective therapeutic method were methodological. This negative result should stimulate us to redouble our efforts to develop methods appropriate to the scientific investigation of homeopathy.²

Historical column 1

This is the first of three articles by Bernard Leary. His subject is the reaction to homeopathy in the 19th Century. He said that, throughout the century, the conventional medical journals went out of their way to denigrate homeopathy. Whatever the event reported, if the doctor concerned was a homeopath, this was given prominence in the headline. He gave an example taken from the *British Medical Journal* of 8th June 1855, it was entitled "Death from Homoeopathic Treatment", and reprinted a letter from 'A Surgeon' to the *Kentish Mercury*; in which he scoffed in colorful language at the coroner's verdict of 'Death from Natural Causes' on a young girl. The mother had administered a homeopathic remedy the day after the girl became ill; after which the girl "apparently recovered her usual state of health". She suddenly died 2 days later. He described the verdict as a ridiculous farce.

Leary commented that this type of report continued to be printed for decades; at a time when homeopaths still used potencies in the manner of Hahnemann. However, later in the century the picture was not so clear-cut, and there could perhaps have been cause for concern. The author described how homeopaths, such as Dudgeon and Hughes, tried to align homeopathy with conventional medicine and some abandoned potencies altogether, using conventional and even toxic doses. Thus, unfortunately, there appeared in the *Lancet* in 1892 a piece entitled "Poisonous Homoeopathic

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Prescriptions"; decrying the change which had taken place in homeopathic notions since the days of Hahnemann. Leary thought that this possibly played a major part in bringing about another later reaction and the supremacy of the doctrines of JT Kent.³

Melanie Hahnemann

This interesting seven-page *provisional reappraisal* of the second wife of Hahnemann was published in *Homeopathy*, the *Journal of the British Homeopathic Association* 1985. It is reprinted here as a tribute to the author, Sidney Hunt, who had recently died. It is remarkable to learn from his obituary⁴ in this issue that he came to homeopathy only 7 years earlier at the age of 80. It states "Through his study of the homeopathic literature Sidney became interested in Hahnemann's second wife, Melanie. He came to the conclusion that Melanie had been maligned by her peers and that she was in fact a very intelligent person with a vast skill and knowledge of homeopathy and had been a great personal support to Hahnemann. Sidney was in contact with two researchers of Melanie's life".

The author described his history as a "tentative attempt to do justice to the memory and reputation of the French wife of Samuel Hahnemann, covering briefly their meeting and marriage in Saxony, their life and work together in Paris and after her husband's death, her declining years in poverty and obscurity. Melanie has been presented to English readers mainly through foreign eyes, not always friendly. Even on the complete information I have so far been able to assemble, I feel justified in trying to put the record straight". He produced a very vivid account of Melanie and of their life together, with quotations from various sources.

Once again, however, the theme of antagonism to homeopathy runs throughout. Hahnemann was exiled to Koethen because of it. Then, on arrival in Paris, permission to practice was refused; but this was followed by a remarkable change. Guizot, the Minister of Public Health and of Education defied the French Academy thus: "If homeopathy is a chimera or inward application it will fail of itself. If, on the other hand, it is a measure of progress it will extend in spite of our preventive measures and that is what the Academy should pre-eminently desire. For the academy has the Mission of furthering science and encouraging her discoveries". This verdict provoked intemperate comment in the *Temps* of the day.

The author saw the accusation of Hahnemann's insanity as a victory for malicious rumor, and one that was flatly contradicted by HV Malan, who was his pupil and signed his death certificate. The rumor cost homeopathy a stake in the Rockefeller millions. The father was dedicated to homeopathy, but opposed by the son, whose belief in

Hahnemann's insanity prevailed. Finally, Melanie herself, as a widow, was brought to trial for her practice of the art, which was illegal in France without medical qualification. Twenty-five years later, her American diploma was recognized, and the French presented her with a belated 'amende honorable' (she had continued to practice!).

Melanie Hahnemann had many detractors, especially concerning her conduct in her widowhood, and in her relationships with her step-children; but the author was convinced of her courage, enterprise, tenacity and industry, with ideas of woman's role far ahead of her time. She was the first and perhaps the greatest woman homeopath.⁵

Book review

Homeopathy and the medical profession by Philip A Nicolls

The reviewer considered this as probably the most comprehensive history ever written of the influence and impact of homeopathic medicine on the healing art. The book is written by a scholar; it is a treatise. Each chapter ends with an extensive bibliography, showing the depth of study and the months of research the author must have put into his exhaustive work. Every conclusion is backed up by extensive and detailed references. The book contains all the answers homeopaths require to confound their critics – and without being one-sided. There are two pages which describe the author's excellent history of all the events of the past 150 years; discussing the significance of events such as the cholera epidemic, Boyd's emanometer, entry into the NHS, and the survival of the art despite extensive vilification. "Homeopathy will always have to fight for its life". The reviewer saw this as an important reference book: "when arguments about homeopathic medicine crop up, as they often do, and you want an answer, you would be very unlucky not to find it in Philip A Nicolls's classic".⁶

References

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- 3 Leary B. Historical column 1. *Br Hom J* 1988; **77**: 192–193.
- 4 Taylor R. Obituary: Sidney Hunt. *Br Hom J* 1988; **77**: 208.
- 5 Hunt S. Melanie Hahnemann: a provisional reappraisal. *Br Hom J* 1988; **77**: 174–180.
- 6 Nicolls PA. Homeopathy and the medical profession: book review. *Br Hom J* 1988; **77**: 194–196.

OBITUARY

Dr J Dickson Mabon

1 November 1925–10 April 2008



Jesse Dickson Mabon, known as Dickson, died on 10 April 2008 at the age of 82. Best known as a long serving Labour MP, he was also a homeopathic physician. Member of the Faculty of Homeopathy. President of the Faculty of Homeopathy (1995–1996) and an influential supporter of homeopathy. He was the first chairman of the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital NHS Trust, in which post he served with great distinction, playing a leading role in saving the hospital from closure in the early 1990s. I worked closely with him at that time. I learnt a lot and will always be grateful for his canny and determined leadership.

Dickson was appointed Chair of the 'shadow' Board of the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital at one of the darkest moments of the Hospital's history, in late 1991. A date (1 April 1992) had been set for the closure of the hospital by Bloomsbury and Islington Health Authority, and it really looked like the end of the road. At that time league tables of overspending by health authorities were published regularly and Bloomsbury and Islington had the dubious honour of always being at the top (or bottom!), as the most overspent. The Health Authority had already closed a series of smaller hospitals in their 'patch' and seemed set to do the same to the RLHH. Not that it would have solved their main structural problem: they had two teaching

hospitals (Middlesex and University College Hospitals) but a budget for one!

It was fortuitous that around this time Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government announced the idea of the NHS internal market, which included NHS Trust Hospitals, in the 1989 White Paper 'Working for Patients'. I remember accompanying Dickson to hear David Mellor, at that time Chief Secretary to the Treasury, speak at BMA House on NHS Trusts. One of the points Mellor made was that no hospital should become an NHS Trust solely to avoid closure. I said to Dickson 'Well that rules us out, I suppose'. He grinned and winked, saying 'I wouldn't be so sure about that'. And he was right! Soon afterwards we received permission to form a shadow NHS Trust and developed a plan to establish the RLHH as an NHS Trust.

At our first attempt we were told that although we had made a strong case, the RLHH was not ready for Trust status because it lacked an adequate managerial structure. But it was a tribute to Dickson's political skill that, exceptionally, we were granted a year's reprieve. We were funded from central government sources while we organized a management structure and appointed staff. But it was no push over, 3 weeks before the deadline for submission of the Trust application the shadow board was close to despair because we realized that our draft bid would convince nobody. But Dickson rallied us with a stirring, almost Churchillian, speech – as a result of which I spent several sleepless nights completely reworking the bid! The document ended up with a rather odd structure: a long introduction with seven appendices. The appendices had been the original bid!

Ultimately the bid succeeded: in autumn 1992 the Department of Health granted permission for the formation of the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital NHS Trust, which formally took control of the RLHH on 1 April 1993. It was the second smallest NHS Trust in the country (after Teddington Memorial Hospital NHS Trust). Dickson was appointed its first Chairman, serving until 1997. It is difficult to imagine how we would have found a successful resolution to this historic crisis in the RLHH's history without Dickson's shrewd reading of the situation, his political skill and connections and, above all, his robust optimism.

He went on to become President of the Faculty of Homeopathy in 1995. With Elizabeth Wincott as Chief Executive he played a significant role in modernising the Faculty. Born in Glasgow, a butcher's son, Dickson graduated in medicine from Glasgow University, where he was President

of the Student Union. But he soon turned to politics; he was elected Labour for Greenock in December 1955, the youngest Labour MP at the time. He was twice Chair of the Scottish Parliamentary Labour party and a government minister for 9 years, including a period as Minister of State at the Department of Energy with responsibility for North Sea oil. He was appointed a Privy Councillor in 1977. He was a strong pro-European, defecting to the Social Democratic Party in 1981 over the Labour party's commitment to leave European Community and its infiltration by the hard left, claiming that 'Trotskyists and other extremists have penetrated Labour's ranks to the core'. He lost his parliamentary seat in 1983, but rejoined the Labour party in 1991.

Dickson was of stocky build and his long parliamentary career made him blunt and outspoken, sometimes to the

point of being abrasive. He did not immediately endear himself to everybody. But there was no malice in his forthrightness – he just said what he thought and thought what he said. Most of those who were on the receiving end understood this, quickly forgave him and sometimes even recognized that he was right!

We should not quickly forget Dickson's contribution to homeopathy and to saving the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital.

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