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## HOMEOPATHY AND THE NHS

At this year's QED meeting in Manchester (*note 1*), Michael Marshall received a roar of approval from his audience for his progress in tackling the absurdity of NHS spending on homeopathic treatment, which is estimated to be around £3M annually. As Project Director of the Good Thinking Society, Michael has written to all of the 211 clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in England about their provision of funding for homeopathy. Most do not allocate any money for this form of alternative medicine and in the cases of some that do, the amounts involved are tiny (*is this supposed to be a joke? – Ed.*). Substantially more funding is provided in areas where there is a homeopathic hospital, such as in North Somerset and South Gloucestershire and in some part of London (whose CCGs were unable to give a figure). One successful outcome of this project has been that the CCG in Liverpool has agreed to review its decision to allocate £30,000 a year to homeopathic treatment (*note 2*). This has come about by the Good Thinking Society's obtaining legal advice and representation. This comes at a cost and **you are invited to donate online to this campaign** (*see note 3*). At the time of writing, the campaign is just £2,500 short of its £10,000 target.

Could the same success be achieved in the case of acupuncture? I doubt it. Courses of acupuncture are available for patients attending many NHS pain clinics and are undertaken by medical staff employed there, sometimes at consultant level, who have trained in acupuncture. So, at least as far as pain relief is concerned, it's pretty much embedded in the NHS

The actual number of NHS prescriptions for homeopathic remedies and their total cost have declined drastically in the last 20 years (*note 4*). It would be wonderful if all the money saved by this and by successfully campaigning to eliminate *all* funding for homeopathy were diverted to more effective and cost-efficient treatments. Unfortunately, this is not what real life is like. The NHS-funded homeopathic treatment that patients currently receive is obviously unnecessary on clinical grounds but it is unlikely that their doctors have *not* prescribed them a conventional treatment that *is* necessary. So logically the patients don't need any conventional treatment in place of homeopathy (and if they insist on continuing with homeopathy they will have to pay for it themselves). I would bet, though, that their doctors will feel obliged to prescribe *something* in its place. And that 'something' might be as expensive or even more so. In medicine, money saved by eliminating waste may only be wasted on something else.

Indeed, only adhering to treatments that are 'evidence-based' (a concept that has tended to become oversimplified and overvalued – see *note 5*) does not by itself mean that billions of pounds of NHS money is released to fund other evidence-based treatments. More salient are the over-application of medicine, notably the conducting of tests and the prescribing of treatments - evidence-based or not - that are unnecessary and even harmful, and the diagnosing of everyday problems as medical illnesses (*notes 6 and 7*). (This is not a problem confined to the NHS in the UK; in fact it has been highlighted in particular in the USA, where medical care tends to be over-inclusive and thus unduly expensive.) Most alarmingly, a recent study from the University of York has suggested that spending on over-priced drugs by the NHS 'does more harm than good' (*notes 8 and 9*).

Set against all of this, the funding of alternative medical treatment by the NHS appears relatively benign. So, just as, for example, Ben Goldacre has exposed the iniquities of the alternative medicine industry *and* excoriated the pharmaceutical industry for its egregious practices, skeptics, for their own credibility if nothing else, should demonstrate their awareness of the flaws and shortcomings of conventional medical practice.

## Notes

1. <https://qedcon.org/>; see also entry under 'Of Interest' in this issue.
2. <http://goodthinkingsociety.org/projects/nhs-homeopathy-legal-challenge/>
3. <https://www.justgiving.com/Good-Thinking-Society-Appeal/>
4. <http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/news/172-the-further-decline-of-homeopathy-on-the-nhs.html>
5. 'Evidence-based medicine' is more complex than simply being informed by the results of clinical outcome trials, which may only provide limited and general guidance and may not be without flaws. It is about what the

most effective and cost-efficient treatment is for an individual patient given his or her diagnosis, severity of symptoms and their duration, ability to tolerate likely side-effects, age, sex, past medical history, co-morbidity, likely future quality of life, etc., etc. See e.g. <http://www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g3725>.

6. <http://www.medpagetoday.com/MedPageTodayat10/LessIsMore/51756>

7. <http://www.bmj.com/too-much-medicine>

8. <http://www.york.ac.uk/media/che/documents/NICE%20Threshold%20Press%20Release%20190215.pdf>

9. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d00c4a02-b784-11e4-981d-00144feab7de.html#axzz3bMEtk6CK>