

# Science v 'qua

Scientifically proven or are health benefits all in the mind? **Carly Gibbs** investigates the argument for and against ancient homeopathy.

**I**MAGINE being in a car accident but declining a doctor's help. Janice Priest says she hasn't been to see her GP in 30 years — despite the fact she's had several major accidents.

When a 4WD door swung back on her chest she was taken to hospital. Once there, her vital signs indicated heart issues but she refused treatment. She asked for homeopathic arnica, meditated for 1.5 hours and signed a document saying she wouldn't be treated.

Back at home, she strengthened her heart by sipping hawthorne berry tea for a year. She used homeopathy when she says she had a stroke. And again when a rotary hoe jackknifed into her left shoulder.

Priest, a former nurse who holds a doctorate of science, has been practising homeopathy for 40 years and says while she's grateful for New Zealand's hospital system, particularly surgeons, the overuse of drug subscriptions is "unacceptable" because of the side-effects and pollutants.

Forget religion and politics. If you want to start a debate, bring up alternative therapies. The health media is awash with claim and counter-claim around homeopathy and it seems everyone has an opinion.

According to research company UMR, more than 50 per cent of Kiwis believe homeopathy works. But Tauranga medical professional Shaun Holt says homeopathy is based on nonsensical theories and is "really, really stupid".

Dr Holt, who refers to homeopathy as "quack potions", conducted a survey that was published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* in 2009, which showed 93 per cent of Kiwis don't know what it is.

Homeopathy is grounded in tenets created by German physician Samuel Hahnemann in 1796, who essentially



**SHE'S A BELIEVER:** Janice Priest says the biggest ongoing challenge homeopathy faces is whether

believed that diluting something and shaking it vigorously would create a potent substance. The water molecules would then "remember" the original substance.

From his perch outside his office "aka Bethlehem Coffee Club", Dr Holt, 40, gives the following analogy of homeopathy's potency.

"This coffee," he says, pointing to his half-drunk mug. "Say I give you some homeopathic arnica. This coffee here contains more cyanide than the homeopathic arnica contains arnica."

"There'll be a few molecules of cyanide in here. There is in just plain

water. You can measure them if you want to. But you couldn't measure any arnica in the homeopathic arnica, because there isn't any. It's diluted until there's none left."

So if that's the case, why do so many people say homeopathy works?

Dr Holt says it goes back to history. When homeopathy was invented, people in homeopathic hospitals in England thrived. But not because of the products, but because homeopathic hospitals were clean. "People didn't know about the germ history of disease. Now we know more about how people die and get sick."

But we're out of the Dark Ages and



# ack potions'



PHOTO/JOHN BORREN 010212JB01BOP

whether it is or isn't, scientifically proven.

what's keeping people interested?

Dr Holt, who holds degrees in pharmacology and medicine, says people want to believe it works and it has a placebo effect.

"If you go to a homeopath and get some stuff and take it, you're just going to feel better, almost always. It's expectation and it's huge. That's why every drug trial factors in (the placebo effect) because you can get 30-40 per cent improvements from placebo. It's remarkable."

Dr Holt says there has never been a study to show homeopathy works but homeopaths pick up on the bad studies

and refute them. "That's what you call pseudoscience. They've got the jargon and the lingo and can fool just about everyone, but a trained medical person."

However, he falls short of banning homeopathy all together. He says homeopaths often have long consultations with patients which makes them feel good and homeopathic remedies are completely harmless. "Unless you have 10 gallons and get water toxicity," he quips.

"Homeopaths generally believe what they do is helpful, they're just wrong."

"The British Medical Association describes homeopathy as witchcraft. If

you're giving water with nothing in there and saying it's got magical properties, it's witchcraft. I don't think they should be burned at the stake but I'd advise no one to see them — ever."

**S**UCH negative connotations about homeopathy could make people examine homeopathy more closely, believes Brookfield's Kerry Clancey.

Dr Clancey, a GP of 25 years, has also been practising homeopathy for 18 years, and said it would be sad to see availability restricted, prices go up and

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# Different approach to health

■ Continued from C1

remedies slapped with the same restrictions as less safe complementary therapies, such as some imported medications that have been found to have drugs in them.

Dr Clancey says enough research has been done to show there are effects from homeopathy that are different from placebos.

She says homeopathy works at a level that technology cannot yet explain. "I see it acting. When you've been a GP for 25-plus years you get a sense of when something works and when it doesn't."

In England, homeopathy is widely used and is a favourite with the royal family. Orthodox medicine can't solve all medical problems and there is a need for other tools in the tool box, she says.

"Evidence-based sometimes misses the individuality, where homeopathy looks at the whole person and whole story, which to me, is what the GP is trying to do."

And, says Susanna Shelton, principal of Bay of Plenty College of Homeopathy and co-president of the New Zealand Council of Homeopaths, criticise all you like but homeopaths are no fools.

Raised in Virginia, Shelton has been at the college since 1991 and says she too was a sceptic before trying homeopathy for herself.

Thirty years ago, a friend, who was a medical student at the time, dared she try it for her eczema. It worked, and she hasn't used steroid creams since.

There are about 200 registered homeopaths in New Zealand and about 20 of them live in the Bay of Plenty.

Homeopaths offer a "complementary" service to conventional medicine and understand when it's time to refer patients to GPs. A national diploma in homeopathy takes four years and one quarter of their training is in conventional medical science.

She says few people use homeopathy exclusively.



**SUPPORTERS:** Natalie Kohu, son Te Manawanui and her "suitcase" of homeopathic remedies



Homeopathic remedies work best with consultation but, for minor illnesses and first-aid situations, you can often prescribe for yourself or with minimum input from someone else.

The college runs an introduction course on how to use the top 10-12 remedies at home, including a popular remedy called Nux Vomica, which works well for hangovers and over-eating, clearing the "toxic load".

A homeopathic consultation costs about \$60 for children (that's a consultation lasting 45 minutes to an hour) and for adults \$75, for a consultation lasting an hour to 90 minutes. Remedies cost less than \$10 and are, in most cases, dispensed from a pharmacy.

And while Shelton says success is high, nothing — not even conventional medicine — is 100 per cent.

So who is right and who is wrong?

Priest says the best people can do is look into homeopathy themselves and dare to try it. The biggest ongoing challenge homeopathy faces is whether it is or isn't, scientifically proven.

Priest says a lot of drugs on the market don't even have true science, they only have laboratory research. She says up until the 1970s, doctors dispensed herbs and homeopathy.

But then the herbal pharmacopoeia was separated and that's where everything was split.

Priest believes homeopathy can deal with any condition in the body.

"The benefit of your doctor is to have a blood test but a blood test can only analyse a certain amount and then they can prescribe. People can find conditions earlier but the danger with the medical is to mask a condition. Whereas homeopathy goes to the life force of the body so it can heal itself. The interesting thing is they (alternative and conventional) work well together."

What about the medical doctors who say homeopathy just doesn't work?

"Well, you're dealing with somebody who doesn't understand nature's life force," Priest says, from her homely office on Cameron Rd.

Priest is supportive of the studies done by Japanese author Masaru Emoto known for his claims that human consciousness has an effect on the molecular structure of water.

Emoto claims that positive changes to water crystals can be achieved through prayer, music or by attaching written words to a container of water.

## LIKE WITH LIKE

■ Homeopathy is a controversial system of alternative medicine more than 200 years old.

■ It calls for treating "like with like", a doctrine referred to as the "Law of Similars". The practitioner considers all a patient's symptoms then chooses as a remedy a substance that produces a similar set of symptoms in healthy subjects. The remedy is usually given in tiny concentrations.

■ Apart from the symptoms, homeopaths examine aspects of the patient's physical and psychological state, then homeopathic reference books known as repertories are consulted, and a remedy is selected based on the totality of symptoms.

■ Homeopathy is not herbalism or naturopathy.

■ The New Zealand Council of Homeopaths claims that homeopathy can help with fertility, behavioural issues and mental illness.

■ Many of its claims are at odds with modern medicine and scientific methods.

"They (medical doctors) have more of a clear-cut drug, surgical approach. It's another aspect of learning that's not in their training, just as drug training is not in homeopathy training," Priest says.

"You have the traditional view point of the human body against the drug therapy of a medical/surgical approach. So the debate will always continue. A bit like an electrician explaining to a plumber what he needs to do. Two completely different approaches."

Those high up in the medical world shake their head at such claims.

New Zealand Medical Association deputy chairman Mark Peterson believes homeopathy's success comes on the back of a slick marketing campaign.

"There are some GPs who do natural therapies but rather in a way of naturopathy rather than homeopathy. The advantage of that is that they have knowledge in conventional medicine and are able to detect a diagnosis."

Dr Peterson says it's "certainly of concern" if people are seeking homeopathy when feeling sick and not going to see a GP also.



**NO:** Shaun Holt says homeopathy remedies are so diluted there's no point in even trying them.  
PHOTO/260112/FOI80P

Health professionals by law have to communicate with one another and Dr Peterson says whether they think homeopathy is "crap" or not, there is stipulation for medical doctors to have conversation with those administering their patients alternative remedies.

Finally, he says any homeopath with a doctorate outside of medicine needs to be "very careful" they make it clear to their clients they are not a doctor of medicine.

The Western Bay's Medical officer of health, Dr Phil Shoemack, said he'd be disappointed and change his GP, if he or she, tried to offer him homeopathy.

"I don't go to a medical professional expecting treatment that has no science behind it."

In general, medical professionals are expected to practise medical science, not homeopathy, Dr Shoemack says. The first step in treating an unwell person is diagnosis and the second step is working out the treatment options.

"If you don't have the first step right, it's sort of like throwing a dart at a dart board."

When asked if homeopathy shouldn't be practised at all, Shoemack doesn't think it's for him to say.

"There are so many different theories of health care. Very few of which have a sound scientific basis and not everything taught in medical school has been proven, and what is proven today, can be disapproved in 10 years' time. But every approach should be focused on looking into further evidence, so when new evidence come up it's about keeping an open mind."

Dr Shoemack says when it comes to

**"There are therapies."**

Mark Peterson, NZ





that she has used on her children since they were babies.

PHOTO/JOEL FORD 260112/JF36BOP





**BUCKING BELIEFS:** Liza Schneider became frustrated that anti-inflammatory and antibiotic medicines were only addressing symptoms so now offers alternative remedies.

PHOTO/ 270112.JF258OP

Dr Holt's placebo argument, there is also the argument, "well what does it matter as long as they feel better?"

"But as long as they are better," Dr Shoemack says. "And it's not a life-threatening condition in the first place."

In the same breath, even if that's the case, he says homeopathy is undermining society's understanding of science which, ultimately, could be seen

head and put a hat on her.

"It works wonders for my children and it always has. I'll go with whatever works."

Kohu has a "suitcase" of remedies at home and has used Pulsatilla to calm her children when upset, Ignatia for grief, Apis for swelling, and Nux Vomica on herself.

Kohu is also a patient of Dr Clancey.

Mum-of-three

Kristy Cockerill has been using homeopathy since she was a teenager and has tried everything from arnica, to rescue remedy, to antidotes

for motion sickness, tummy bugs, colds and fevers.

"We still use conventional medicine but, generally, the first point of call, we go to homeopathy and look at treating it naturally first."

Cockerill says friends "poo-poo it" but she's seen it work in her children and that's all that matters to her.

Last week, she gave her son homeopathy for a fever and his temperature dropped back down to a "reasonable" temperature within 40 minutes.

"If you get the results, who really cares?"

But there are plenty of people who say it does matter. Vicki Hyde, media spokeswoman for New Zealand Skeptics, says fancy sounding words hide the fact homeopaths are claiming special magical properties for plain water, which has no active ingredients.

"A homeopathic jet-lag tablet, may list 30C of Arnica montana but that doesn't mean it has any arnica in it. 30C means the initial arnica present has been diluted to a solution of 0.000 000 000 000 000 000

000 000 000 1 per cent. Long past the point where even one molecule of arnica is present.

"They even believe the more you dilute, the more potent the product. But try that on your party guests with a gin and tonic and they won't be very impressed."

New Zealand Skeptics go as far to say it's "unethical" for pharmacies to stock this product and treat it like a "real" health product.

"At least if you buy herbal products, you're likely to get some part of the herb in the preparation."

The professional standards adviser for the Pharmacy Council of New Zealand, Barbara Moore, says in the Pharmacy Code of Ethics, pharmacists should only sell products where there is no reason to doubt its quality or safety, and where there is credible evidence of efficacy. Moore says as long as customers are fully informed about what they are buying, they should be given the choice, just as pharmacists have the choice.

Irishman Clive Stuart, a former sports massage therapist, turned homeopath, owns Bethlehem's River Oaks Health.

He says he's seen some incredible improvements in patients using individualised homeopathy treatments for ADHD, rheumatoid arthritis and autism.

Stuart says a homeopathic remedy generates an electro-magnetic charge when the mixture is shaken and diluted. The charge is amplified at each step of the dilution process. "So lack of molecules does not mean lack of effect," he says.

He argues the placebo effect can't be true when homeopathy works on children and animals.

Tauranga's Liza Schneider, who set up New Zealand's first fully integrated holistic vet clinic, agrees.

Frustrated that anti-inflammatory and antibiotic medicines were only addressing her patient's symptoms, she sought to offer alternative remedies.

Paula and Melissa Lees of Brookfield say homeopathy helped their late daschund dog, Penny, who was suffering chronic urinary incontinence.

Penny had been treated with a veterinary drug for five years and, as long as she took it, had no incontinence.

But the Lees were concerned about possible side effects, including aggression, and switched to herbs and homeopathy.

Her aggression subsided and her urinary incontinence stopped.

In Hamilton, Bay of Plenty College of Homeopathy ex-student Tineke Verkade runs Homeopathic Farm Support, which allows farmers to use homeopathy on cattle.

Homeopathy is also used in other agricultural pursuits.

Stuart says for some, homeopathy may seem "implausible" but it works in situations where the placebo effect is an improbable explanation.

## Some GPs who do natural

New Zealand Medical Council

as quite dangerous and potentially spread to all elements of scientific analysis, such as weather forecasting.

There is, however, no danger in mixing remedies with traditional medicine, because homeopathy is "so dilute".

"I see no point in swallowing bits of water and paying for it, to be blunt. Whether it's deer velvet to shark fin soup, the world is full of superstitions and, essentially, that's what it comes down to."

But try telling that to the people who believe it works — the mums who wake in the middle of the night to a crying baby, or the rugby players trying to fix a bad back after some rough-and-tumble.

Tauranga's Natalie Kohu uses homeopathy regularly on her three children and even administered it to her middle child, Kura-Pounamu, five minutes after her birth.

When Kura-Pounamu, now 7, was born she had a bruise on her head from being centred in the birth canal.

Kohu says within minutes of giving her arnica, she could touch her baby's