

Homeopathy once again, Or, What End is This Anyway? Concerning The Lancet Editorial

The latest polemics involving Homeopathy is responsibility of British medical journal *The Lancet*. Its vol. 266, of August 2006 reproduces a study conducted at the University of Bern, Switzerland the conclusion of which puts into question a series of studies which concluded favorably on the effectiveness of Homeopathy in some diseases. As one of the most reputed medical journals in the world, *The Lancet* stance exerts an impact on Homeopathy equal or even stronger than *Nature* 1988 criticism of theories concerning the possible mode of action of homeopathic remedies.

The article mentioned above together with the Editorial furnish new weapons to Homeopathy enemies and it must be admitted that it afflicts serious damage to present-day efforts by the homeopathic scientific community to establish its claims to scientific respectability. They cannot fail to negatively impress governmental agencies in different countries, and in the case of Brazil, specifically the PNMNTC – National Policy for Natural and Complementary Therapies and Medicine -, recently accepted for evaluation by the Brazilian Ministry of Health.

The reputation of this latest source of attack makes it urgent to develop new strategies to make it clear to the scientific community once and for all why is it that effectiveness-trials usually fail in the case of Homeopathy. The crucial issue is whether clinical-trial models, with a definite epidemiological design focused on pathology-control are eligible to accurately assess the effectiveness of Homeopathy or not. Homeopaths tend to feel ambivalent: any kind of scientific treatment of Homeopathy is always good, yet a doubt permanently lingers: what is the epistemological price to pay? In other and simpler words: is it really worthy in any sense?

Cohort or populational trials might perhaps represent a solution. Yet they demand a sort of funding that no single pharmaceutical laboratory and no single government in the world has ever offer to grant. Lower-budgeted Homeopathic provings suggest possible reproducibility of results, yet they are not methodologically fit to assess therapeutical results. It seems the only paths opened for Homeopathy to show positive results are large-scale health-related quality of life studies or models, such as the one Professor Madel T. Luz, from the Institute of Social Health, State University of Rio

de Janeiro, is in the process of building, grounded on the notion of the individual as elaborated by the Human Sciences. Yet a design for its potential application in clinical practice still needs to be developed.

On the other hand, the prejudiced notion of Homeopathy as the poor relative of conventional Medicine ought to be dissipated. Grants for research are truly needed, but without a basic consensus and a careful selection of priorities, it is to be feared that reality will be overwhelming.

A second myth that ought to be dispelled is a media-enhanced notion that some "crucial experiment" will definitely "prove or disprove" Homeopathy or any other system of ideas once and for all. This pseudo-imperative is epistemologically groundless: Georges Canguilhem has shown that such a category may be attributed only decades or even centuries later.

Homeopathy would only benefit if it were to establish wider-scoped connections to post-mechanist scientific disciplines and frameworks of thought. Yet, first it needs some self-criticism. It is true that *The Lancet* editorial trespassed the limits of scientific ethics and the professional honor-code, yet it may be dialectically seen as an answer to those who preach a weird and contradictory sort of Homeopathic supremacy. *The Lancet* editor was truly clueless and offensive when he acclaimed "the end of Homeopathy", but homeopaths are none the wiser when they proclaim a fundamentalist belief in Homeopathy as a medical ideology. It is a fact that needs to be faced: instead of celebrating every single statement concerning Homeopathy "scientificity" or "mathematical precision", they should be asking for proofs. It may come as a shock to many a homeopathy: but it cannot be done. This is Homeopathy dirty little secret.

A healthier stance would be for Homeopathy to acknowledge itself as a medicine in a process of transition, a medicine which looks for a different standard of precision, a different kind of effectiveness. Non-compliance would implicitly prove right all demands of effectiveness on the grounds of natural science brand of lawfulness which, no doubt of it, will reappear once and again.

Possibly Brazil is the country with the largest population of certified homeopaths – physicians, veterinarians, dentists and pharmacists, as well as basic researchers – in the world, clinical and laboratory research activity has been impressive in recent years. Yet results have not been published in neither conventional nor "alternative" medicine international journals. Strong efforts ought to be focused on this aim, in order to break national and linguistic barriers. If not for the cause of science nor for the cause of

Homeopathy, at least for the sake of patients, as they are the weakest link in this evil chain of selective information.

The history of humankind, as a culture or civilization, may be understood as the search for logical consensuses. This to say, the history of the sciences is as long as problematic. As Max Planck explained, many a scientific idea or program, including whole systems of science and philosophy, passed away merely because their supporters disappeared. There are many different sorts of sciences: better established and developing systems, hard sciences and human sciences, completed epistemologies and others in construction. There are, thus, different forms of consensuses and numberless frameworks. This is the ground for a variety of choices and methods.

There was, for sure, a time in history when there was no room for dialogic reason, i.e. reason as emerges from dialog, as nature was the domain of kings and reason the monopoly of ecclesiastic *concilia*. Dangerous times: thinkers and scientists had to emigrate in order to survive bonfires. A 400-year tyranny with an amazing power to allow or ban ideas, merely changed its clothes: from Spanish Inquisition to "Scientific Institutions". Logic Positivism would help by establishing a long-lasting super-paradigm: empirical research with the imperative of reproductibility as the *sine qua non* of any hopeful scientific theory.

Finally, we reach our own time. Universities, surprisingly, present us with the gift of safehouses for diversity. They opened up the doors and admitted non-conventional scientific rationalities that challenge the methodological monopoly where quantity and massive reproductibility rule the scene. This is one of the reasons that make *The Lancet* editorial only so weird. Beginning from its title, its arrogance and malevolence caught us unaware, its straightforwardness makes any alibi improbable, as it predicts "the end of Homeopathy". Most certainly, there is an "end" here, but is it actually Homeopathy's?

When an "end" is proclaimed, it is necessary to be very much aware of the echoes it will awake. Let us imagine, for a second: what would mean an "end of Homeopathy"? One less problem for scientificism? The solution of the timeless question of placebo-effect? Would it end controversy in therapeutic arenas? Would it make smoother the process of drug-approval? Would it offer relief to the suffering of the sick? Would it finally solve the problem of custom-made treatment programs, adapted for every individual patient? Would it inaugurate a new era, when self-criticism will prevail over conviction? Would it protect the sick from a therapeutic approach that

no matter tradition and the contributions it brought to medical art, is charged with dangerous innoquity?

After all is said and done: what does our society really wants? We believe it wants to be listened. This because we hoped that we were at the end of an era when some were "more equal" than others. When a modest "I don't know" substituted "absolute certainties". I am ready to admit that perhaps we had idealized our time and reality came all of a sudden to challenge us. But I look around and what I see is people of flesh and blood. And signals are optimistic. Dim signs, vanishing signs, raw signs, yet optimistic.

Because they suggest that what society really wants is medicine and science to cure and to give support to the sick, to be by their side, to explain things up, to offer both technology and meaning. People do want is to live as close to Happiness as possible, as Brazilian geographer Milton dos Santos used to joke. People want someone who would listen to them, someone who really cares about what they have to say, someone who would record their stories. People wish that scientifically-grounded doctors offer much more than a single point of view. The sick do not want neither to be lied to nor to be scared by a "naked true" dressed up as "medical diagnostics" which takes their breath – and lives – away. The sick, specially the chronically sick, want solutions. For sure, there is not always a solution. But when there is not one, we always have a trump-card, that sooner or later will be acknowledged as an asset: a disposition to care and an almost superhuman patience not to give up.

The Lancet editor does not honor the memory of Christoph W. Hufeland, first director of the School of Medicine of the ground-breaking and model University of Berlin and one of the first editors of medical journals, who in times as critical as our own, dared to publish Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of Homeopathy, even wellcoming the new perspectives he was opening up. And neither does he honor the tradition of *The Lancet*, which in its first edition, in 1823, published a study on acupuncture by John Elliotson, a physician. I charge *The Lancet* editor with being a slave of sameness and not having the courage to risk his reputation for the sake of the respectability of a science which happens to be also an art. Because all clinical practice, no matter if allopathic, homeopathic, or any other variety, is an art whenever performed with consciousness and prudence.

The British editor played a safe middle-field before the rival team had even scored its first goal. Greed dimmed his judgement and, as it is well known, this is fatal in science. If he had have the courage to risk his position, he would have saved his dignity – he could have merely announced that the

game had just begun and that the final outcome was yet unpredictable. And to cool off the most revolted, to explain that this is, precisely, how science works, invoking Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Judah Folkmann and Jacques Benveniste as witnesses.

The unavoidable feeling remains that *The Lancet* editor knowingly manipulated the scientific public opinion, when he gave the status of "crucial experiment" to a flawed paper. With this he put into question his skills to select and appraise scientific papers.

I accuse *The Lancet* editor and all other self-invited guests to a not yet ready feast of impersonating Orson Welles and falsely announcing "the end of Homeopathy". Yet, such a strident distemperance merely showed a lack of talent. Damage will be checked: the public is not naïve and will not dance in the victory ball without previously demanding full proof. And honest scientists, even those averse to Homeopathy, upon realizing that the so-called "meta-analysis" was nothing but mere manipulation of data, will think twice before citing it as a source. An only cause for pride is the effectiveness of *The Lancet* network of diffusion. We should be wary in the future of the slyness of our opinion-makers.

On the other side, let us look for positive features that may teach us something. *The Lancet* editorial staff ought to be thanked for showing homeopaths that we need to close ranks, we need to overlook our theoretical, doctrinary even practical divergences. *The Lancet* staff should be widely praised for the courage of showing that scientific journals are ruled by censorship and prejudiced biases.

Finally, *The Lancet* deserves our acknowledgement by, indirectly, showing us the way homeopathic research must follow if it truly wants to go somewhere. To proclaim a non-existent precision, to put forward as its aim the control of definite diseases is a laughable goal. Worse, it is to walk blindly and firmly in a mine-field. We are fully aware of Homeopathy epistemological complexity and its chronic vulnerability to demands for empirical validation. But this is precisely why homeopaths cannot insist in proclaiming a supposed mathematical effectiveness and conventional Medicine cannot impose on subject-focused Homeopathy a model grounded on disease. If there would exist something like journalistic equanimity, all scientific systems would be doomed, as science, by definition, is to search for new things, through the testing of hypotheses, for the sake of a majority of people.

Finally, I accuse ourselves, medical researchers, of falling prey to inertia. I blame ourselves for our lameness and radical disengagement and the most unwise stoicism before the truculence and brutality of deconstructions. Some colleagues assured us that most people will never read *The Lancet* editorial. But will most people also not watch the news on TV, whether the BBC, CNN, or sensationalist shows as *Fantástico*? Will they also not read newspapers from the *New York Times* to *O Globo* or magazines as *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Veja*? Will they turn off the radio? Will they not look at the news on the opening page of Internet servers? Just the people who do not receive any kind of information are completely blameless. Nothing can be asked of them and they deserve our apologies.

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