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Holistic and Homeopathic Medicine

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The term *holism* comes from the Greek word *holos*, meaning “whole.” It was conceptualized by the South African statesman and biologist Jan Christiaan Smuts in his book *Holism and Evolution* (1926) as a way of viewing and describing living things, including human beings, as entities more than and different from the aggregate of their parts. The term *holistic* (or *wholistic*) is being used more frequently in all human endeavors, particularly since the 1970s. The increasing fragmentation and microspecialization in every branch of knowledge, resulting in narrower perspectives, has led to holism being considered the desired alternative.

Although the term *holism* came to be used since the 20th century, the conceptualization of holistic medicine is credited to Edgar Cayce (1877–1945). A child of paranormal qualities, Cayce puzzled his doctors when at the age of 24 he cured his months-long bout of laryngitis himself through the practice of hypnosis. Known as The Sleeping Prophet, Cayce left more than 14,000 readings in varied areas of the subject, of which about 9,000 were on medical ailments mostly based on a holistic approach to medicine.

What Does Holistic Medicine Mean?

As an approach to medicine, holistic medicine also relies on the use of sophisticated medical or surgical action; however, at the same time, it does emphasize health promotion and patient education. Rather than considering patients only as biological machines, holistic medicine lays due emphasis on patients’ self-capacity to heal themselves and considers them as active partners in the overall health care process. Holistic medicine draws its elements from the traditional techniques of health care that remained confined to certain geographical boundaries and cultures over the ages. Thus, holistic medicine is built on the traditional knowledge of medicine of a variety of cultures like Chinese, Indian, Greek, and so on, which had remained confined to the particular societies for thousands of years.

Foundations of Holistic Medicine

Holistic medicine rests on three cornerstones; *first*, it follows a *humanistic* approach to medicine. The humanistic approach to medicine puts emphasis on the relationship between physicians and patients. It also stresses the psychological and spiritual development of both the patients and the physician. *Second*, holistic medicine follows the *psychosomatic* approach to medicine. The psychosomatic approach to medicine stresses the interdependence and mutual influence of psychological and physical factors. The *third* cornerstone of holistic medicine is that it follows the *behavioral* approach to medicine. According to this approach, both psychological and social causes and effects of the illness are important for effective treatment. Thus, the holistic philosophy embraces an approach that promotes overall body wellness.

Why Is Holistic Medicine Preferred?

Holism has always remained vital to healing, and some of history’s most gifted physicians embraced holistic beliefs. For example, the Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates emphasized the environmental causes and treatment of illness and the importance of emotional factors and nutrition in health and disease. He spoke at length of the wisdom of the healing force of nature and of the physician’s need to use it.

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Similarly, Chinese and Indian texts reveal the importance that these ancient healing traditions placed on the maintenance of harmony between the individual and the social and natural worlds, diet, exercise and meditation, self-care, and self-regulation.

Studies suggest that the basic tenet of holistic medicine, that is, its advocacy that illness and injury are often the result of disharmony in the mind-body-spirit equation, which function as “one integrated unit,” has attracted many toward it. A disharmony in any of these areas affects the whole person, not just the particular area. Research conducted in Australia suggests that people in the country have widely supported the philosophy of holistic medicine, and as a result, many Australians are becoming less enthusiastic about Western or conventional medicine. A large number of Australians today prefer to take their well-being into their own hands, and they feel empowered when they do so. They believe that holistic medicine is as much about a way of life as it is about medical treatment.

There is no doubt that the past century witnessed remarkable advancement in the field of medical science and technology. The invention of antibiotics like penicillin proved instrumental in the treatment of many previously fatal diseases. The advancement in medical technologies also has remarkably helped in the diagnosis of diseases with greater precision. Yet unfortunately, the treatment of many common health problems, such as high blood pressure, stress, depression, alcoholism, insomnia, and so on, still remained unsuccessful. Moreover, the resentment that a large number of people felt toward the Western system of medicine for being too impersonal and too narrow and the attitude of doctors treating a patient as a biological machine, without taking into consideration the “humane” elements, led to the advocacy of an alternative system of medicine. This led to the emergence of holistic medicine.

Apart from the holism approach, a few other circumstances led to the popular emergence of holistic medicines as an alternative to the Western system of medicine. *First*, the aftershocks of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s led to consumer awareness in many other social settings, including health care. For example, women became aware of the humiliating way they were sometimes treated by their male physicians. They raised concerns when doctors told them not to worry about a surgical procedure or about the side effects of the drugs they prescribed. They wanted to know what problems they had and what they could do about it. They also demanded to be treated as thinking, feeling adults by their doctors. *Second*, in the United States, advancement in psychological perspectives in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the traditional system of medicine. Family therapy and humanistic psychology emerged as distinct trends challenging the traditional practice of the Western system of medicine. *Third*, even after the remarkable breakthroughs and achievements in the field of medicine, the modern system of Western medicine faced a few crises, especially toward the 1960s. For example, Rene Duos, a microbiologist, who developed some of the most powerful antibiotics, made a remarkable statement in his book *Mirage of Health* (1959). He maintained that the discoveries he and others had made had far less to do with improving the health of people in industrialized countries like the United States. According to him, advancement on the economic, social, nutritional, and behavioral fronts contributed much more. In 1976, Thomas McKeown, based on his study of public health statistics from England and Wales since the 17th century, concluded that only 10 percent of the improvement in the rate of death from infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia could be credited to individual medical treatments, including antibiotics. About 90 percent of the improvement came from

positive changes in nutrition, the environment, and behavior of the people.

In addition to such revelations, two issues that further made the case against the Western system of medicine were (1) the deteriorating physician-patient relationship and (2) the ever higher cost of treatment, often resulting from “advanced” diagnosis and “newly introduced molecules.”

Alternative Medicine and Holistic Medicine

While discussing holistic medicine, one should be clear regarding the concept of alternative medicine and its relation to holistic medicine. Alternative medicine refers to (alternative) systems of medicine other than allopathic or conventional Western medicine. Practicing medicine under the different streams of alternative or holistic medicine requires certification of proficiency, and the practitioners are referred to as doctors. Alternative medicine is used in place of allopathic or the conventional system of medicine, although many people use both together.

Homeopathy as a Stream of Holistic Medicine

Homeopathy had a major role in extending the popularity of alternative medicine. Significantly, homeopathy medicine also stands tall on the philosophical foundation of holistic medicine. One of the fundamental principles of homeopathy is the *law of similars*. This is based on the premise that “like cures like.” This means that a substance produces symptoms of illness in a well person when administered in large doses. If we administer the same substances in minute quantities, it will cure the disease in the sick person. The system is also based on the belief that the body is a “constitution” and must be treated as a whole. The right remedy is to “kick start” the system into *healing itself at the most basic level*. Thus, homeopathy aims not to treat disease but to heal the body. The second principle of homeopathy is the *law of infinitesimals*. According to this law, a substance becomes more potent when diluted.

The concept of the “constitution” provides homeopathy an important foundation. Many argue that in many ways, this is the vital life force that Samuel Hahnemann, its founder, believed exists in all of us. Accordingly, the classical homeopath engages in a highly detailed discussion with every patient, especially during the initial visit. The homeopath is concerned with everything, not just the physical symptoms, occurring at the time. The homeopath wants to know about the person’s emotions, personal interactions, work life, stress, and dreams, and anything else of importance in the person’s life. The homeopath also takes into account the person’s appearance, demeanor, and body language.

Controversies and Issues Surrounding Homeopathy

Homeopathy was developed by the German doctor and biologist Samuel Hahnemann in the 18th century. Its fundamental principles, as discussed above, are fundamentally different, in theory and practice, from the principles of Western medicine. Though both streams of medicines are based on exact empirical observation, their methods of observation and interpretation are fundamentally different. The conventional Western system offers treatment based on the clinical diagnosis, while the symptoms displayed by the individual patient play a less important role. Conversely, the system of homeopathy offers treatment based on the totality of symptoms and signs displayed by

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the individual patient. The clinical diagnosis is considered complementary for assessing the medical situation but has little bearing on the choice of remedy. Administering homeopathic remedies and mixtures merely on the basis of a clinical diagnosis is against the principles of homeopathy.

At the time Hahnemann developed the stream of homeopathy, medical science and science and technology were not as advanced as today. As a result, the notion of the constitution as propagated by Hahnemann could not be empirically measured or substantiated. Another frequent criticism leveled at homeopathy is its use of substances that are toxic in their natural state. Based on the *law of infinitesimals*, homeopathy uses natural toxic elements in their diluted form. For example, arsenicum album, the diluted form of arsenic, is a well-known homeopathic medicine.

Effectiveness and Relevance of Homeopathy

Notwithstanding the criticism leveled at it, homeopathy has been able to prove itself. Numerous studies have established its effectiveness. For example, the Swiss Federal Social Insurance Officer conducted a 7-year study during the period 1988 to 1995 to gauge the effectiveness of a few alternative streams of medicine, including homeopathy, in order to determine if they can be covered under the national health insurance scheme. The study reported the effectiveness of homeopathic treatment and its cost-effectiveness. Though recognition was initially declined, the Swiss government in 2011 approved homeopathy as one of the recognized streams of medicine in the country, and patients undergoing treatment in homeopathy were declared eligible for national health insurance coverage with effect from January 2012.

Many other countries in the world have also included homeopathy as an important constituent of their health care system. For example, in 1995, the Government of India took the initiative to consider homeopathy as one of the recognized systems of medicines in the country. In 2014, the Government of India formed a separate ministry, the Ministry of AYUSH (standing for Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy), with a view to providing focused attention to the development of education and research in these streams of medicine.

On the question of side effects of use, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine maintains the following view: "A systematic review has found that homeopathic remedies in high dilution, taken under the supervision of trained professionals, are generally considered safe and unlikely to cause severe adverse reactions." Furthermore, it maintains that although some forms of liquid homeopathic remedies contain alcohol, the Food and Drug Administration has not reported adverse effects. Another potential effect practitioners talk about is the initial worsening of symptoms in patients, which can be alleviated by adjusting the dosage.

Concluding Remarks: What About the Future of Homeopathy?

On account of its "unorthodox" foundations, most conventional physicians undermine the scientific principles of homeopathy as simply false and baseless. Empirical studies, however, suggest otherwise. The counterallegations against conventional medicine are, however, no less in terms of both quantity and quality, as already discussed. Paul Ray, the celebrated sociologist, conducted a study among a group of people to understand their lifestyle choices on health and ecological advocacy. Based on the study, he found that in 1999, 71 percent of the group had reported using homeopathic medicine.

Studies also show that the patients who treat themselves (self-care) and their families with homeopathy do so almost exclusively for minor problems. This is because the effectiveness of most conventional therapies for minor problems is limited and they are more prone to causing adverse effects. Thus, on this front, homeopathy may be a better choice. Even if homeopathy is of no benefit, clinical trials and lengthy clinical experience show that it is much less likely to cause adverse effects than over-the-counter products and conventional medicines. Self-care has been an important niche for homeopathy and might be a good role for homeopathy in the future.

See also [Meditation](#); [Yoga](#)

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