

Review: Marketplace program about homeopathy

May 11, 2011

REVIEW

CBC Television's Marketplace program devoted its January 14, 2011, episode to an exploration on certain issues involving homeopathy, in particular its claims to consumers of effectiveness, its products' ingredients, and its relationship to conventional medicine and science.

Co-host Erica Johnson interviewed several people in the episode, titled [Cure or Con?](#) Among them:

- A group of skeptics who participated in a public demonstration to take homeopathic products.
- A parent who preferred homeopathic treatment for her child.
- An oncologist on the scientific connection with homeopathic treatment.
- A scientist whose laboratory conducted tests on the ingredients in the products.
- A government official who explained Ontario's decision to regulate homeopathy in the province.
- A representative of Boiron, the world's leading homeopathic product company.
- A representative of the homeopathic industry council.

Extensive online material augmented the television program, including the laboratory results, question-and-answer sessions with the Ontario official and with Health Canada, a "tip sheet" on considering homeopathic treatment, and several links to other websites.

The program found people who had used homeopathic products to successfully deal with illness. It acknowledged testimonials from those who had been relieved of symptoms by homeopathy. It conceded that many of those testimonials were difficult to explain.

It found doubts among scientists about the effectiveness of the products and the existence of active ingredients in them. In the most extreme case, the program found a clinic that was asserting homeopathy could reduce cancerous tumours, an assertion that an oncologist called sad and dangerous.

Marketplace noted that the Ontario government was about to start regulating the homeopathic profession and Johnson interviewed a health ministry official who said there was public demand for the products. Elsewhere in the program it noted that the federal government had provided drug identification numbers to several homeopathic products, but that it had not conducted any tests on efficacy or effectiveness of them.

As it concluded, Johnson suggested to the Boiron representative that it note on product labels there were no active ingredients. The response of the industry and the company was that even if today's science is not capable of detecting effectiveness conventionally, it does not mean it is not effective.

The complainant, Kathryn Robbins, wrote CBC News on January 15, 2011, after seeing the program. She said it did not meet standards of good journalism. "I didn't see anything of the kind — only personal bias, ignorance and sensationalism," she wrote.

Robbins, a longtime homeopathic consumer, noted that no one knows for sure how the remedies work, just that they do.

Robbins questioned the motivation behind the program. "How homeopathy works is indeed a mystery — but when did mystery become a logical basis for concluding that something does not work or is, even worse, a con?"

On February 16, the executive producer of Marketplace, Tassie Notar, wrote Robbins to assert CBC had "no preconceptions approaching the story. We did not set out to 'disprove' homeopathy. We set out to look at it from a consumer's point of view."

Notar wrote that the story focused on the "pending provincial regulation of the homeopathic profession, and the efficacy of the medicines used." She said that other organizations and companies were approached to comment in the episode, but only the Homeopathic Medical Council of Canada agreed. Ranvir Sharda of the council was interviewed. She asserted that the program presented facts.

Robbins wrote back that testing the products was ineffective because they were not applied to people suffering from ailments. She compared it to testing a pain reliever on those with no pain.

She asserted that the program ignored opportunities to interview authorities on homeopathy in Canada or elsewhere. While she agreed that the bulk of evidence in support of homeopathy was anecdotal, she said that the more than 200 years of such successes "cannot be discounted. . .people will not continue to pay for treatments that do not work."

She noted: "Here are the facts: You cannot scientifically prove that homeopathy does or does not work."

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) call for accurate, fair reporting, professional judgment on matters of debate, and make specific mention of journalism involving health and science issues.

It notes that CBC must *“take care to understand properly and reflect the true implications of medical or scientific study results that we obtain, especially those involving scientific data.”*

The policy adds: *“In matters of human health we will take particular care to avoid arousing unfounded hopes or fears in persons living with or close to those living with serious illnesses. We will also avoid suggesting unproven benefits or risks to health related to changes in habits of consumption of food or pharmaceutical products.”*

The policy says that conclusions from such reporting *“are based on thorough research and not on personal opinion. Research for such programming will be meticulous and will be carried out as much as possible in consultation with competent organizations and specialists.”*

It calls for strict protocols involving reports on scientific testing and says that *“this type of study should be carried out in accordance with basic rules of research or with the support of independent institutions or experts.”*

CONCLUSION

Homeopathy, from the Greek words homeo (similar) and pathos (illness or disease), is a form of medicine in which practitioners treat patients using highly diluted preparations of substances associated with ailments.

It abides a belief that the body’s own healing systems can be stimulated by these ultra-dilute substances. It furthers the view that the human soul perceives the presence of these minute substances, even when there are practically no atoms of them detectable, and that the remedy stimulates defence.

This belief is commonly referred to as the “like cures like” Principle of Similars. It defies principles of allopathic medicines. Homeopathy also subscribes to the view that water has a form of memory.

The online resource, Wikipedia.org, concludes: “The collective weight of scientific evidence has found homeopathy to be no more effective than a placebo,” an inert treatment that simulates a medical intervention and can generate a perceived or real patient improvement.

The most recent significant study of homeopathy came from a 2009 British Commons committee following months of testimony. The committee considered the ultra-dilution notion “scientifically implausible” and that systematic reviews and analyses “conclusively demonstrate that homeopathic products perform no better than placebos.”

Among its conclusions: “We regret that advocates of homeopathy, including their own submissions to our inquiry, choose to rely on, and promulgate, selective approaches to the treatment of the evidence base as this risks confusing or misleading the public, the media and policy-makers.”

It found that some patients felt better, but only because of the placebo effect, and that didn’t mean the products themselves were efficacious. Indeed, it said, “When doctors prescribe placebos, they risk damaging the trust that exists between them and their patients.”

It recommended no further funding of tests or of homeopathy from the National Health Service. “There has been enough testing of homeopathy and plenty of evidence showing it is not efficacious.”

It suggested that products not have any medical claim or implied government endorsement and for labeling to “make it explicit that there is no scientific evidence that homeopathic products work beyond the placebo effect.”

This review, however, cannot drill into the validity of homeopathy. Instead its role is to examine if the program violated CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices in reflecting available expertise on the issues.

I am cognizant of the journalistic challenges in exploring the subject, because they are little different than a rational examination of faith. This poses a central question for the truth-pursuing journalist: When something can’t be explained, can you validate it?

Many supporters of homeopathy cannot scientifically explain its consequences but believe they exist, so journalism has to step carefully into that field, ensure that diverse voices are accorded fair treatment, and that balance is achieved.

The achievement of balance does not mean mathematical equivalence; rather, the important principle is that different views are, in the words of the CBC policy, “*reflected respectfully.*”

CBC’s Marketplace has a distinguished history of thinking like a consumer. Its investigative techniques are regularly leavened by accessible, light touches from their personable hosts.

The program producers say they started their research with nothing more than curiosity about the subject. I accept they didn’t set out to debunk. Over the course of weeks the program unit developed an understanding of the issues and was aiming to link the program to the impending regulation of homeopathy in Ontario.

It found frustrating its efforts to present supporters of homeopathy or any methodologically sound research. In some cases representatives were suspicious of program motives. While it did not want to dwell on the scientific issues, it also didn’t want to suggest there was underlying scientific credibility to homeopathy.

That said, it didn't want to dismiss its believers. I found strong signs of fairness in its approach amid an overwhelming weight of conventional evidence against homeopathy. Among the points:

- That many supporters believe in the products, regardless of what the scientific community says; its extensive discussion with a consumer gave her ample time to present her perspective.
- That many have seen improvement in their conditions, even though there are not conventional explanations.
- That homeopathic consultation often benefits patients because they give broadly based attention to what ails them.
- That representatives from a council representing homeopaths and a company representing its products were given several opportunities in the program to assert their views.
- That people have "voted with their feet" in accepting homeopathy, so regulation is a logical consequence in Ontario.

The program research reflected strong CBC standards and practices.

Rather than evaluate studies put forward by supporters of homeopathy, it referred them for an independent review of methodology to determine how they could and could not be employed in its program. Its consultation was in line with policy.

Significantly, it also commissioned [laboratory study](#) of two products' ingredients to determine the presence of atropine (Belladonna) and emetine (Ipeca); in finding only infinitesimal traces, it properly questioned efficacy. Again, its use of independent authorities was in line with policy.

I did not share the program's defence of its segment with the Boiron representative to present her with a proposed label that said there were no active ingredients in the products. When the subject involves personal health, irreverence can weaken high-quality journalism.

There was no violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman