

## Speech by Professor Kate Thomas

### Homeopathy Research Institute Reception

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Kate Thomas

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Prof Thomas was appointed as Professor of Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research at the University of Leeds in 2005. She previously worked at the University of Sheffield where she was Deputy Director of the Medical Care Research Unit in the Health Services Research Section of SchARR. Prof Thomas was a member of the UK NIHR Health Technology Assessment Research Commissioning Board for six years and is currently on the Board of the NIHR Health Services Research Programme. Her research interests include the evaluation of complementary therapies for use in the NHS.

Thank you, I don't think I've ever had a welcome like that, so thank you very much!

I'm here to talk to you about why we need research in homeopathy. I've got five reasons and I'd like to go through them one by one. They're based on 25 years' experience in academic and health service research, with a special interest in complementary therapies and their potential role in the NHS. I also realised when I was writing them, that they are reasons being given in light of the recent and very negative Science and Technology Committee report into homeopathy and the somewhat less negative government response.

So, why we need research in homeopathy. My five reasons. The first reason is for **patients**. Quite simply the patients are the most important. They are part of healthcare and healthcare research and we forget that at our peril. It's important for patients because so many people use it and value it as part of their healthcare. You've already heard David [Tredinnick MP] say how its use is widespread both in the UK and abroad. The Committee report somehow managed to give the impression that homeopathy was a peculiar and marginalised bit of British behaviour, but worldwide millions of people use it... in Europe, India, Brazil and particularly in France and Germany, as we've heard. In the UK we use it a lot too. And **my last research suggests 10% of the adult population used homeopathy in the last year**, most of them buying a remedy over the counter, but some of them actually seeing homeopaths. **Those that went to see homeopaths, half a million a year, they'll be having one and a half million consultations – that's a significant bit of healthcare behaviour**. It's also significant because we know that levels of chronic illness (those long-term conditions that people are seeking help for) will be increasing and we've got an ageing population. Homeopathy is likely to have a role in helping us with both of those things.

Now these patients have legitimately important questions and the two most important questions I think in relation to research are, “Can homeopathy help me?” and, “When is it safe for me to use it?”. We need to start answering those questions.

My second reason for why we need homeopathy research is to **inform NHS policy because current access of homeopathy in the UK is inequitable**. 90% of people visiting a homeopath pay for it out of their own pocket. There’s relatively very little provision for it within the NHS, where resources are constantly under pressure and research evidence is needed to change current patterns of resource use. Without that evidence, it’s not going to be possible.

There are great examples of this kind of research already happening. I don’t know whether you have met my colleagues in Barnsley who are doing NHS-based research looking at homeopathy for two chronic illnesses – fibromyalgia and IBS. These studies are really important starting points but we need bigger studies if we are going to convince policy makers by demonstrating effectiveness, but they are expensive and unfortunately not considered as a priority.

My third reason why we need homeopathy research is to **encourage the development of homeopathic research lists**, because this is how you develop a vibrant research community. We need research by homeopaths as well as research on homeopathy. I have a notion of what I call the ‘Golden Triangle’ in research and for me it’s where it’s linked to the NHS. Its NHS consultants working with university researchers, working with homeopathic practitioners and working together as a team.....and I’d like to see much more of that. Where something has been available, homeopaths have shown just what they can achieve for example, by undertaking PhDs in universities in the UK and these are the people who will be tomorrow’s research leaders in homeopathy.

Ok, my fourth reason for why we need homeopathy research is to **explore the big unanswered questions** regarding how homeopathy might work. Homeopathy is controversial and 200 years down the line we still seem to have more questions than answers. **The Science and Technology Committee sought to dismiss homeopathy as “scientifically implausible” but to me good science should be excited by anomalies**, they’re often a sign that we’ve got something to learn and as Marilyn Robinson memorably said, *“the most important statement in science is not ‘Eureka’ but ‘that’s curious’”*. **We need curiosity-driven, open minded, fundamental research into the mechanisms of homeopathic treatment and they are more likely to be about physics than medicine.**

I want to share with you a small snippet from the oral evidence that was presented to the Committee. One of the Committee members asked one of the expert witnesses a question, *“In our briefing we had it explained that homeopathy claims that water has a memory. It has been said that if this was true it would turn science upside down, do you agree with that?”* The Expert witness replied, *“Physics? It’s not really anything that interests me!”* Well I say, ‘Shame on you!’ It should interest us all and seeking answers to these questions about homeopathy has potential to influence thinking way beyond the world of homeopathy.

**My fifth and final reason is a personal one. I’m an academic and I get very worried when I hear people telling me what I can and what I can’t research.** The Committee report recommended that no government funding would be used for homeopathy research. The Government response was not to accept this

recommendation. They made it clear however, that homeopathy would remain a low priority for research funding. If public research funding isn't forthcoming for research in homeopathy in the form of project grants and PHD studentships, we need an organisation just like the Homeopathy Research Institute to raise funds. Let's make sure it happens anyway.....