

HRI Malta 2017: Looking to the future on an historic island

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Abstract

After the success of the Homeopathy Research Institute's previous conferences on 'Cutting Edge Research in Homeopathy' in Barcelona 2013 and Rome 2015, the expectations for Malta 2017 were high. Delegates were not left disappointed, enjoying a fast-paced programme of the highest calibre research yet, in an inspiringly beautiful and historic location. The continuing commitment of the research community to generate high quality studies in this rapidly evolving field was clear. In this report we present highlights from this memorable event, described by many attendees as 'the best HRI conference yet'.

Providing a platform for global research

As homeopathy continues to stimulate intense debate in many parts of the world, research is playing an ever more vital role in the development of homeopathy as an academic field and medical discipline. The Homeopathy Research Institute (HRI) was proud to once again host a world-class event, this time on the stunning island of Malta.

102 abstracts underwent rigorous peer review to produce the fast-paced diverse programme of 36 oral presentations and 37 posters, presented by researchers from 19 countries. 200 delegates joined us from 25 countries, including first-time attendees and those who had been to both previous HRI conferences.

Keynote presentations

The conference was opened by keynote speaker, Prof Michael Frass (Germany) and Dr Elio Rossi (Italy), who both presented data on the positive role that adjunctive homeopathic treatment can play in cancer patients. Drawing on his vast experience, Prof Frass called for an increased use of homeopathy alongside conventional care for patients with cancer, listing a wide scope of potential applications. For Prof Frass, the most important of these is the enhancement of patients' quality of life¹, which was also echoed by Dr Rossi's presentation based on his work in Lucca, Italy.

Dr Emma Macias-Cortés (Mexico) presented her keynote address describing a high quality double-blind, double-dummy superiority trial, comparing three test groups receiving homeopathy or fluoxetine or placebo; this study demonstrated the clinical benefits of individualised homeopathy for peri- and post-menopausal women with depression². These three key presentations highlight the largely un-tapped potential of homeopathic care when provided within public funded hospitals in real-world settings, demonstrating what can be achieved for the good of the patient when homeopathy is integrated into conventional healthcare.

Dr Stephan Baumgartner (Germany) and Prof Harald Walach (Germany) looked back over two decades of research in their respective fields, with the ultimate aim of framing our next steps for future research.

HRI Malta 2017 – Key facts

- 200 delegates from 25 countries
- Presenters from 19 countries
- 36 oral presentations and 37 posters
- Diverse programme: quantitative and qualitative clinical research, basic research, veterinary research and provings



Keynote presentation – Dr Stephan Baumgartner

Dr Baumgartner presented an overview of key experimental models that have now demonstrated reproducible and reliable differences between ultra-high dilutions and controls. Dr Baumgartner unpicked many problems he faced when performing *in vitro* and *in vivo* basic experiments on ultra-high dilutions. He stressed that we should not be deterred when experiments 'don't work', but instead face the challenges presented head on; for example, when we take a broader look at the results of basic research, patterns become clear, such as the non-linear cyclical responses seen to different potencies.

Similarly, in the closing keynote address, Prof Walach gave a thought provoking and challenging presentation

on his response to being faced with questions of non-reproducibility in tests of proving symptoms. In particular, Prof Walach took an innovative approach to his observations, postulating that remedy effects are non-local and thus require the design of any experiment, proving or clinical test to consider the underlying assumptions being made about the direction of cause and effect of remedies³.

"This is the premiere research conference in homeopathy – it is definitely the leading event of its type."

Dr Peter Fisher, Clinical Director, Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine, UK

Interactive panel discussion sessions

New for HRI Malta 2017 were two interactive panel discussion sessions. These sessions were designed to involve all delegates, and to further promote the exchange of ideas, encouraging a unified approach to solving the challenges faced by homeopathy today.

The first panel discussion session tackled Homeopathy and Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) – a topic recently announced by the WHO as one of the main future challenges in public health. To set the scene, Dr Fisher's presentation emphasised the impact of AMR on both human health and the spiralling costs of conventional healthcare; Alison Fixsen discussed the evidence of homeopathic interventions in upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs) and Petra Klement further supported this point, presenting the results of a new placebo-controlled trial showing that the homeopathic complex *Tonsilotren* decreased infection rates in patients with recurrent tonsillitis.



Panel discussion – Alison Fixsen, Dr Peter Fisher, Petra Klement, Dr Kate Chatfield

The subsequent panel discussion revolved around the fact that despite encouraging results, complementary treatment approaches are still not part of the available treatment guidelines for infectious diseases or the global WHO strategy for tackling antimicrobial resistance. This raised the important question of how we can implement and encourage the inclusion of homeopathy as a viable contributor to tackling this global problem.

The second panel discussion on "Research priorities for the future" was opened with a short presentation from Hazel Partington and Dr Jean Duckworth (UK) who described preliminary results from their Delphi study on future directions in homeopathy research. The study canvassed

opinions from experts and stakeholders in the homeopathy and research communities on what they perceived to have been the most significant or impactful piece of research to date; priorities for future research; and the audiences that need to be reached by future studies.

Each panel member (Dr Stephan Baumgartner, Dr Robbert van Haselen, Dr Elizabeth Thompson and Dr Alexander Tournier) gave a brief summary of what they felt to be the priorities for future research before inviting delegates to contribute. The discussion covered the need for mixed portfolios of evidence, the advantages of pragmatic trials and cohort studies, focusing on effectiveness gap conditions, considering how clinicians use evidence and a reminder that priorities may be different in countries where attitudes to homeopathy are different.

Clinical research highlights

Three clinical research sessions included recent studies on a wide range of clinical conditions and the challenges faced in a number of different research settings. Presentations were given by Dr José Eizayaga (Argentina – aggravations), Philippa Fibert (UK – ADHD), Dr Christien Klein-Laansma (Netherlands – PMS), Dr Lex Rutten (Netherlands – cough), Dr Rajesh Shah (India – recurrent respiratory tract infections) and Prof Ka Lun Aaron To (Hong Kong – diabetes).



Dr Robbert van Haselen, Dr Gustavo Aguilar-Velazquez & Dr Emma Macias-Cortés

In addition to performing new clinical studies, analysing the published scientific literature is also essential for informing future research. To this end, Dr Robert Mathie (UK) gave two presentations covering the latest work in his programme of systematic reviews – his study of pragmatic trials comparing homeopathy with 'other than placebo' controls, and his review covering double-blind, placebo-controlled randomised trials of non-individualised homeopathic treatment⁴. The former review identified trials using 'add-on homeopathy' as the most promising area for future research; the latter review found that assessing the validity of the non-individualised homeopathic intervention has an important impact on results and conclusions.

Similarly, Dr Katharina Gaertner (Switzerland) described the work of their team performing a systematic review of clinical

trials including observational studies, quoting the work of Concato et al⁵ showing that well conducted observational studies yield similar results to randomised controlled trials and thus can justifiably be included in large-scale reviews of homeopathy studies.



Plenary session

In stark contrast, Rachel Roberts (UK) presented a searing indictment of the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council's report on homeopathy. Roberts' analysis and meticulous critique revealed multiple methodological flaws in the 'Australian Report' and ended with the damning conclusion that these errors are a case of misfeasance, not innocent scientific error⁶.

"Conferences like this act as an essential catalyst, sparking new collaborations, and providing a place for homeopathy researchers to enjoy and share in each other's passion for their work. HRI is honoured to offer our colleagues an inspiring respite from the hard battles we often face in our common pursuit of scientific excellence in this field."

Dr Alexander Tournier, HRI Chairman

Lab-based and plant-based research highlights

The synergistic importance of clinical and basic research in homeopathy was a key theme in Rome 2015. Again, in Malta, it was clear that as we make great strides in clarifying and improving the clinical evidence base in homeopathy, equally large strides are also being made in understanding the fundamental nature of homeopathic medicines and their actions in living systems.

Sandra Würtenberger (Germany) presented the results of a systematic review of physicochemical studies of homeopathic potencies and Dr Alexander Tournier (Germany) asked the question of whether homeopathy really is that implausible, looking at the physics behind current theories of homeopathy's mechanism of action. These overviews were supported by a number of presentations of original laboratory studies in different sessions showing clear differences between ultra-high dilutions and controls using a wide range of experimental systems. Presentations were given by Dr Gustavo Aguilar-Velazquez (Mexico - *E. angustifolia* and *T. occidentalis* on cervical cancer cells), Dr Leoni Bonamin (Brazil - *Phosphorus* on macrophages), Dr Steven Cartwright (UK - potency interactions with solvatochromic dyes), Dr Maria Olga Kokornaczyk

(Switzerland - *As45x* on wheat seeds), Dr Claire Laurant (France - anti-mutagenic effects of a combination remedy), Anezka Marie Sokol (Germany - various homeopathic 30x preparations on germinating cress seedlings), Annkathrin Ucker (Germany - *Arsenicum album* on duckweed growth rates) and Dr Michel van Wassenhoven (Belgium - analysing the fundamental properties of potentised *Cuprum metallicum* and *Gelsemium sempervirens* using multiple techniques).

Veterinary and qualitative research

We were particularly pleased to be able to offer a platform for veterinary and qualitative research in Malta, as both topics are under-represented in the research literature. We do not often receive abstracts on these topics and we look forward to receiving more in the future.

Representing the field of veterinary research, Dr Cidélio Coelho (Brazil) presented the results of her work using potencies of *Nux Vomica* and *Papaver somniferum* showing significant shortening of post-operative recovery times of cats following ovariohysterectomy.

Qualitative research aims to document experience and find patterns of meaning in it; an approach that Dr Klaus von Ammon (Switzerland) and Dr Irene Dorothee Schlingensiepen (Germany) both took in their presentations of observations from their own clinical experiences. Dr Schlingensiepen assessed the relationship between case-taking/prescribing methods and long-term outcomes for her patients, highlighting the importance of finding the "perfect match" remedy for the best outcome, while Dr von Ammon presented a summary of clinical observations made using structured qualitative methods exploring remedy responses that seem compatible with homeopathic medicines having a field effect.



Gala dinner – Tony Edwards, Rachel Roberts, Dr Alex Tournier & Dr Peter Fisher

Provings

We were also delighted to continue our support of high quality research into provings with a designated parallel session. Fundamental questions within the field of provings were addressed by Prof Ashley Ross (South Africa) and Dr Robbert van Haselen (France) who both presented their systematic and quantitative analyses of proving symptoms. Prof Ross tackled the question of whether there is a difference in proving symptoms between provers taking placebo versus verum, while Dr van Haselen looked at the validity of proving symptoms when used as statistical predictors of treatment success.



HRI conference team – Em Colley, Simon Wilkinson-Blake, Dr Alex Tournier, Phil Hurring, Dr Liz Thompson, Rachel Roberts plus Dr Kate Chatfield and Tony Edwards out of shot

In addition, Dr Peter Smith (Germany) presented the initial results of a thematic analysis of 17 provings of sarcodes from the domestic pig that had been performed between 1993 and 2017, generating indications of what may be considered to be the core 'picture' of these remedies.

"It was fantastic to hear so many people saying this was our best conference yet, but seeing the conference close with a spontaneous standing ovation... that was totally unexpected and incredibly moving. I couldn't be more proud of the HRI conference team."

Rachel Roberts, HRI Chief Executive

Supporting the future of homeopathy research

As an international charity dedicated to promoting and fostering high quality research in homeopathy, we included a pre-conference workshop on "Making studies count – avoiding common pitfalls in homeopathy research". This topic was chosen specifically to highlight ways that the homeopathy research community can work together to try and ensure future efforts are in the best strategic direction, that the latest knowledge is considered when planning new studies and old mistakes are not repeated. Following presentations from Dr Robert Mathie and Dr Stephan Baumgartner workshop attendees were encouraged to examine and discuss practical aspects to consider when building trials and experiments.

In addition, HRI was very pleased to be able to invest financially in the research future of our delegates. With the generous support of the Manchester Homeopathy Clinic, we awarded HRI Educational Grants to 15 UK-resident homeopaths and researchers, supporting their attendance at the conference. These grants allowed us to directly support future generations of homeopathy researchers giving them the opportunity to sample the best research currently available as well as supporting established researchers to disseminate their findings and share their wisdom with others.

Looking forward to 2019

With the resounding success of HRI Malta 2017 still fresh in our minds, we would like to thank all those who made this event such a success – delegates, sponsors, presenters, exhibitors – but particularly Simon Wilkinson-Blake (HRI Event Organiser) and the rest of the Conference Team who have all worked tremendously hard over the last 18 months to bring this event together.

There is no resting on our laurels, however, as plans are already underway to bring you another instalment of Cutting Edge Research in Homeopathy in two years' time. Before the dust has fully settled on Malta 2017 we are already excited to invite friends, old and new, to join us for HRI London 2019.

Accessing conference content

- Abstracts now available at www.hrimalta2017.org/presentations
- Filmed presentations available free of charge in the Autumn
- Conference proceedings to be published in Homeopathy in February 2018
- Presentations from Barcelona 2013 and Rome 2015 available free of charge (www.hribarcelona2013.org/films and www.hrirome2015.org/films)

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