

The Controversial Australian Report: Did the evidence on Homeopathy get a fair hearing?

A report on Homeopathy produced by the Australian Government research institute – NHMRC – found ‘no reliable evidence’ homeopathy is effective. This report has been damaging the reputation of the Homeopathy sector worldwide since its publication in 2015.

NHMRC claim that the evidence on Homeopathy was evaluated in their usual way, using standard accepted scientific methods.

Critics of the report say the evidence was not treated fairly: instead of a ‘level playing field’ with conventional medicine, the method used to evaluate Homeopathy was created by NHMRC specifically for the Homeopathy Review, is unprecedented and without scientific justification.

This report is currently under investigation by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, with NHMRC answering charges of bias, conflict of interest and producing a report which misleads the public. As this investigation enters its 3rd year, we need to ask, who is telling the truth?

NHMRC are experts in reviewing evidence, although normally they would be assessing conventional medicine. So, did they use a usual scientific approach, or did they invent new rules when evaluating the evidence which distorted the results?

The method used for the Homeopathy Review is best summarised as a Cochrane Overview with additional key aspects, including:

- Results expressed as whether ‘reliable’ evidence of effectiveness was found for each health condition, with trials needing to have a minimum of 150 participants and reach a quality threshold of Jadad 5/5 (or equivalent) to be ‘reliable’
- Level of confidence in the results for each condition was calculated using an ‘adapted GRADE’ system which analysed all trials together (despite the fact that they were assessing multiple different treatments and using different clinical outcomes) and using only two criteria – size and quality – instead of the usual 4-5 criteria.

Any scientist who is familiar with clinical research can tell from this information alone that the Homeopathy Review was not conducted in a usual way.

For those not familiar with clinical research it is simpler to explain that these rules lead to 171 out of 176 trials being classified as ‘unreliable’, which explains how NHMRC found no ‘reliable’ evidence homeopathy works.

However, to clarify this point once and for all, NHMRC simply need to answer the following questions:

- a) Were the additional key aspects of the methodology described above created by the NHMRC review team specifically for the Homeopathy Review? (Yes or No)
- b) Has the method used in the Homeopathy Review as described above, including additional key aspects, ever been used in any other review conducted by NHMRC, or by any other research organisation? (Yes or No)

- c) If the method used in the Homeopathy Review is not unprecedented, please supply a copy of another published study which uses this method.
- d) If the method used is unprecedented, please provide a specific reference from the published scientific literature to justify each of the additional key elements:
- Trials need a minimum of 150 participants to be sufficiently powered to be 'reliable'
 - Trials with a quality score of less than Jadad 5/5 are 'not reliable'
 - The 'adapted GRADE analysis' system as described above which was used for assessing level of confidence.

This is not an argument about whether Homeopathy works or not. It is about whether evidence was reviewed fairly and objectively to inform the public.

An Ombudsman verdict is due soon, but in the mean-time everyone affected by this report, including patients, those working in the homeopathy sector and curious scientists interested in emerging fields of medicine, all deserve to hear straight answers to these questions from those who wrote the NHMRC Review on Homeopathy.

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For further information visit www.HRI-Research.org/Australian-Report