

The original German work, „Essay on a new principle for ascertaining the curative powers of drugs“, was first published in 1796. The English edition on hand was translated and edited by R.E. Dudgeon in New York and published in 1852 by William Radde. The following extracts are particularly relevant to the debate concerning the fundamentals of homeopathy and give an impression of Hahnemann’s thoughts on the subject.

As early as 1796, Hahnemann wrote this article, in which he states that only drug provings can lead to reliable knowledge regarding the healing capability of remedies. Approaches, prior to this date seeking to reveal healing forces, as in chemistry, experiments with animals and the doctrine of signatures, are unreliable. It is also mentioned, that the botanical relationship does not permit conclusions to be drawn, with respect to similarities in the action of remedies. This is substantiated by various examples. Also, rather incidental experiences in the treatment of diseases do not provide for a firm basis. As we should “go to work as rationally and as methodically as possible“ and “should trust as little as possible to chance“, experience on the human body is the only alternative for reliably determining the healing capability of remedies. Each remedy produces a specific artificial disease; in the treatment of natural diseases the remedy to be selected, is the one which in the proving has produced symptoms similar to those of the disease which is to be healed. Numerous corresponding examples given in the second part are not included here.

*Samuel Hahnemann*

## **ESSAY ON A NEW PRINCIPLE FOR ASCERTAINING THE CURATIVE POWERS OF DRUGS,**

### **WITH A FEW GLANCES AT THOSE HITHERTO EMPLOYED**

At the commencement of this century, the unmerited honour was conferred on chemistry, more especially by the Academy of Sciences of Paris, of tempting it to come forward as the discoverer of the medicinal virtues of drugs, particularly of plants.

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This folly, which was, with divers variations, perpetrated for nearly half a century, gradually produced an unfavourable impression on the minds of modern physicians, which had been in the mean time more enlightened respecting the chemical art and its limits, so that they now almost unanimously adopted an opposite view, and denied all value to chemistry in the search for the medicinal powers of drugs, and in the discovery of remedial agents for the diseases to which humanity is liable.

In this they palpably went too far. Although I am far from conceding to the chemical art a universal influence on the *materia medica.*, I cannot refrain from alluding to some notable discoveries in this respect which we have to thank it for and to what it may hereafter effect for therapeutics.

Chemistry informed the physician who sought a palliative remedy for the evils occasioned by morbid acids in the stomach, that the alkalis and some earths were remedies.

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Even the *injection of drugs into the bloodvessels of animals* is for the same reason a very heterogeneous and uncertain method ... But at all events, some will say, *the administration of drugs to animals by mouth* will furnish some certain results respecting their medicinal action.

By no means ! How greatly do their bodies differ from ours ! ... Thus much, at least, is certain, that the fine internal changes and sensations, which a man can express by words, must be totally wanting in the lower animals.

In order to try if a substance can develop very violent or dangerous effects, this may in general be readily ascertained by experiments on several animals at once, as likewise any general manifest action on the motions of the limbs, variations of temperature, evacuations upwards and downwards, and the like, but never anything connected or decisive, that may influence our conclusions with regard to the proper curative virtues of the agent on the human subject. For this, such experiments are too obscure too rude and if I be allowed the expression, too awkward.

As the above-mentioned sources for ascertaining the medicinal virtues of drugs were so soon exhausted, the systematizer of the materia medica bethought himself of others, which he deemed of a more certain character. He sought for them in the drugs themselves; he imagined he would find in them hints for his guidance. He did not observe, however that their *sensible external signs* are often very deceptive, as deceptive as the physiognomy is in indicating the thoughts of the heart.

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Perhaps, however *botanical affinity* may allow; us to infer a similarity of action ? This is far from being the case, as there are many examples of opposite, or at least very different powers, in one and the same family of plants, and that in most of them.

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I am far from denying, however, the many important hints the natural system may afford to the philosophical student of the materia medica and to him who feels it his duty to discover new medicinal agents ; but these hints can only help to confirm. and serve as a commentary to facts already known, or in the case of untried plants they may give rise to hypothetical conjectures which are however, far from approaching even to probability

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Though I readily admit that, in general, similarity of action will be much oftener met with betwixt species of one genus, than betwixt whole groups of families in the natural system, and that an inference drawn from the former will have a much greater degree of probability attaching to it, than one from the latter; yet my conviction compels me to give this warning, that, be the number of genera ever so many whose species resemble each other very much in their effects, the lesser number of very differently acting species should make us distrustful of this mode of drawing inferences, since we have not here to do with mechanical experiments, but that most important and difficult concern of mankind - health.\*

As regards this method also, therefore, we come to the conclusion, that it cannot be considered as a sure principle to guide us to the knowledge of the medicinal. powers of plants.

Nothing remains for us but *experiment* on the human body. But what kind of experiment ? *Accidental or methodical* ?

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\* Conclusions relative to similarity of action betwixt species of a genus become still more hazardous, when we consider that one and the same species, one and the same plant, frequently shows very various medicinal powers in its different parts,. How different the poppy-head from the poppy seed ; the manna that distils from the leaves; of the larch from the turpentine of the same tree; the cooling camphor in the root of the cinnamon laurel. from the burning cinnamon oil ; the astringent juice in the fruit of several of the mimosae, from the tasteless gum that exudes from their stem ; the corrosive stalk of the ranunculus from its mild root !

The humiliating confession must be made, that most of the virtues of medicinal bodies were discovered by *accidental, empirical*, experience, by *chance* ; often first observed by non-medical persons. Bold, often over-bold, physicians, then gradually made trial of them.

I have no intention of denying the high value of this mode of discovering medicinal powers - it speaks for itself. But in it there is nothing for us to do ; chance excludes all method, all voluntary action. Sad is the thought, that the noblest, the most indispensable of arts, is built upon accident, which always pre-supposes the endangering of many human lives. Will the chance of such discoveries suffice to perfect the healing art, to supply its numerous desiderata ?

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No ! it is exhilarating to believe that for each particular disease, for each peculiar morbid variety, there are peculiar directly-acting remedies, and that there is also a way in which these may be *methodically* discovered.

When I talk of the *methodical discovery of the medicinal powers still required by us*, I do not refer to those empirical trials usually made in hospitals, where in a difficult, often not accurately noted case, in which those already known do no good, recourse is had to some drug, hitherto either untried altogether or untried in this particular affection, which drug is fixed upon either from caprice and blind fancy, or from some obscure notion for which the experimenter can give no plausible reason, either to himself or to others. Such empirical chance trials are to call them by the mildest appellation, but foolish risks, if not something worse

I speak not here, either, of the somewhat more rational trials, made occasionally in private and hospital practice, with remedies casually recommended in this or that disease, but not further tested. These, also, are performed, unless under the guidance of some scientific principle, to a certain degree at the peril of the health and life of the patient ; but the caution and practical skill of the physician will often avail to smooth much. that is uneven in his half-empirical undertakings

As we already possess a large number of medicines, which are evidently powerful, but concerning which we do not rightly know what diseases they are capable of curing, and moreover others which have sometimes proved serviceable sometimes not, in given diseases. and concerning which we have no accurate knowledge of the exact circumstances under which they are applicable, it may not at first sight appear very necessary to the number of our medicinal agents. Very probably increase all (or nearly all) the aid we seek lies in those we already possess.

Before I explain myself further, I must, in order to prevent misapprehension, distinctly declare that I do not expect, and, do not believe, there can be a thoroughly specific remedy for any disease, of such and such a name,.....

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If I mistake not, practical medicine has devised three ways of applying remedies for the relief of the disorders of the human body.

The *first way, to remove or destroy the fundamental cause of the disease*, was the most elevated it could follow. All the imaginings and aspirations of the best physicians in all ages were directed to this object, the most worthy of the dignity of our art. But, to use a spagyrian expression, they did not advance beyond particulars ; the great philosopher's stone, the knowledge of the fundamental cause of all disease, they never attained to.

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By the *second way*, the symptoms present were sought to be removed by- medicines *which produced an opposite condition.*; for example, constipation by purgatives; inflamed blood by venesection, cold and nitre : acidity in the stomach by alkalis : pains by opium. In acute diseases, which, if we remove the obstacles to recovery for but a few days, nature will herself generally conquer, or, if we cannot do so, succumb ; in acute diseases, I repeat, this application of remedies is proper, to the purpose, and sufficient, as long as we do not possess the above-mentioned philosopher's stone (the knowledge of the fundamental cause of each disease, and the means of its removal,) ... I would call such remedies *temporary*.

But if the fundamental cause of the disease, and its direct means of removal are known, and we, disregarding these, combat the symptoms only by remedies of this second kind, or employ them seriously in chronic diseases, then this method of treatment (to oppose diseases by remedies that produce an opposite state) gets the name of *palliative*, and is to be reprobated. In chronic diseases it only gives relief at first ; subsequently, stronger doses of such remedies become necessary, which cannot remove the primary disease, and thus they do more harm the longer they are employed, for reasons to be specified hereafter.

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I beseech my colleagues to abandon this method (*contraria contrariis*) in chronic diseases, and in such acute diseases as take on a chronic character ; it is the deceitful by-path in the dark forest that leads to the fatal swamp. The vain empiric imagines it to be the beaten highway, and plumes himself on the wretched power of giving a few hours' ease, unconcerned if during this specious calm, the disease plants its roots still deeper.

But I am not singular in warning against this fatal practice. The better, more discerning, and conscientious physicians have from time to time sought for remedies (the *third way*) for chronic diseases, and acute diseases tending to chronic, which should not cloak the symptoms, but which should remove the disease radically, in one word, for *specific* remedies ; the most desirable, most praiseworthy undertaking that can be imagined. Thus, for instance, they tried arnica in dysentery, and in some instances found it a useful specific.

But what guided them, what principle induced them to try such remedies ? Alas ! only a precedent from the empirical game of hazard from domestic practice, chance cases, in which these substances were accidentally found useful in this or that disease.....

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It were deplorable, indeed, if only chance and empirical *apropos* could be considered as our guides in the discovery and application of the proper the true remedies for chronic diseases, which certainly constitute the major portion of human ills.

In order to ascertain the actions of remedial agents, for the purpose of applying them to the relief of human suffering, we should trust as little as possible to chance ; but go to work as rationally and as methodically as possible. We have seen, that for this object the aid of chemistry is still imperfect, and must only be resorted to with caution ; that the similarity of genera of plants in the natural system, as also the similarity of species of one genus, give but obscure hints ; that the sensible properties of drugs teach us mere generalities, and these invalidated by a many exceptions ; that the changes that take place in the blood from the admixture of medicines teach nothing ; and that the injection of the latter into the bloodvessels of animals, as also the effects on animals to which medicines have been administered, is much too rude a mode of proceeding, to enable us therefrom to judge of the finer actions of remedies.

*Nothing then remains but to test the medicines we wish to investigate on the human body itself*  
The necessity of this has been perceived in all ages, but a false way was generally followed,

inasmuch as they were, as above stated, only employed empirically and capriciously in diseases. The reaction of the diseased organism however to an untested or imperfectly tested remedy, gives such intricate results that their appreciation is impossible for the most acute physician. Either nothing happens, or there occur aggravations, changes, amelioration, recovery, death - without the possibility of the greatest practical genius being able to divine what part the diseased organism, and what the remedy (in a dose, perchance, too great, moderate, or too small) played in effecting the result. They teach nothing, and only lead to false conclusions.

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The true physician, whose sole aim is to perfect his art, can avail himself of no other information respecting medicines; than -

First - *What is the pure action of each by itself on the human body ?*

Second - *What do observations of its action in this or that simple or complex disease teach us ?*

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This standard, methinks, can only be derived from the effects that a given medicinal substance has, by itself in this and that dose developed in the healthy- human body .

To this belong the histories of designedly or accidentally swallowed medicines and poisons, and such as have been purposely taken by persons, in order to test them ; or which have been given to healthy individuals, to criminals, &c.; probably, also, those cases in which an improper powerfully acting substance has been employed as a household remedy or medicine, in slight or easily determined diseases.

A complete collection of such observations, with remarks on the degree of reliance to be placed on their reporters, would, if I mistake not, be the foundation stone of a *materia medica*, the sacred book of its revelation.

In them alone can the true nature, the real action of medicinal substances be *methodically* discovered; from them alone can we learn in what cases of disease they may be employed with success and certainty.

But as the key for this is still wanting, perhaps I am so fortunate as to be able to point out the principle, under the guidance of which the lacunae in medicine may be filled up, and the science perfected by the gradual discovery and application, *on rational principles*, of a suitable specific remedy for each, more especially for each chronic disease, among the hitherto known (and among still unknown) medicines. It is contained, I may say, in the following- axioms.

*Every powerful medicinal substance produces in the human body a kind of peculiar disease ; the more powerful the medicine, the more peculiar, marked, and violent the disease.*

*We should imitate nature, which sometimes cures a chronic disease by superadding another, and employ in the (especially chronic) disease we wish to cure, that medicine which is able to produce another very similar artificial disease, and the former will be cured ; similia similibus.*

We only require to know, on the one hand, the diseases of the human frame accurately in their essential characteristics, and their accidental complications ; and on the other hand, the pure effects of drugs, that is, the essential characteristics of the specific artificial disease they usually excite, together with the accidental symptoms caused by difference of dose, form, &c., and by choosing a remedy for a given natural disease that is capable of producing a very similar artificial disease, we shall be able to cure the most obstinate diseases.

This axiom has, I confess, so much the appearance of a barren, analytical, general formula, that I must hasten to illustrate it synthetically.. But first let me call to mind a few points.

I. Most medicines have more than one action ; the first a *direct* action, which gradually changes into the second (which I call the indirect secondary action). The latter is generally a state exactly the opposite of the former.\*

In this way most vegetable substances act.

II. But few medicines are exceptions to this rule, continuing their primary action uninterruptedly, of the same kind, though always diminishing in degree, until after some time no trace of their action can be detected, and the natural condition of the organism is restored. Of this kind are all metallic (and other mineral ?) medicines, *e. g* arsenic, mercury, lead.

III. If, in a case of chronic disease, a medicine be given, whose direct primary action corresponds to the disease, the indirect secondary action is sometimes exactly the state of body sought to be brought about ; .....

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IV. Palliative remedies do so much harm in chronic diseases, and render them more obstinate, probably because after their first antagonistic action they are followed by a secondary action, which is similar to the disease itself.

V. The more numerous the morbid symptoms the medicine produces in its direct action, corresponding to the symptoms of the disease to be cured, the nearer the artificial disease resembles that sought to be removed, so much more certain to be favourable will the result of its administration be

VI. As it may be almost considered an axiom, that the symptoms of the secondary action are the exact opposite of those of the direct action, it is allowable for a *master of the art*, when the knowledge of the symptoms of the direct action is imperfect, to supply in imagination the lacunae by induction, *i. e.* the opposite of the symptoms of the secondary action ; the result, however, must only be considered as an addition to, not as the basis of, his conclusions

After these preliminary observations, I now proceed to *illustrate by examples* my maxim, *that in order to discover the true remedial powers of a medicine for chronic disease it can develope in the human body, and employ it in an very similar morbid condition of the organism which it is wished to be removed.*

The analogous maxim, *that in order to cure radically certain chronic disease, we must search for medicines that can excite a similar disease (the more similar the better) in the human body* - will thereby almost become evident.

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\* Opium may serve as an example. A fearless elevation of spirit, a sensation of strength and high courage, an imaginative gaiety, are part of the direct primary action of a moderate dose on the system : but after the lapse of eight or twelve hours an opposite state sets in, the indirect secondary action ; there ensue relaxation, dejection, diffidence, peevishness, loss of memory, discomfort, fear