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The sources of the common (pre-homeopathic) *materia medica* will be discussed:

- Hypotheses and presumptions concerning the actions of remedies
- Doctrine of signatures
- Chemistry
- Clinical applications, empiricism, application in diseases ("trying")

Hahnemann explains that no reliable knowledge concerning the *materia medica*, i. e. the healing capability of remedies in diseases, can be gained in this manner.

Over the centuries reliable knowledge has been empirically gathered through certain fixed diseases.

But as all other diseases are single and solitary cases, the empirical "trying" process was impossible right from the beginning, especially when prescribing according to disease names.

In homeopathy all these approaches are abandoned as a result of the precise proving of what the remedy can change in the healthy individual. Due to this, reliable knowledge of the healing capability of remedies is gained and a "Materia Medica Pura" results.

Samuel Hahnemann

EXAMINATION OF THE SOURCES OF THE COMMON MATERIA MEDICA

Next to a knowledge of what there is to cure in each particular case which presents itself for treatment, there can be no more necessary knowledge for a practical physician, than an acquaintance with the *curative implements*, to know, namely, what each of the remedies can certainly cure.

Twenty-three centuries have been spent in fruitless labour to discover the way by which the end of this knowledge may be reached ; and not a step has been gained by all the efforts.

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But observe, that *not one*, as yet, ever trod the path that surely and certainly leads to this end. All the paths hitherto trodden were, consequently, as one century was forced to say of those of another, mere ways of error. These we shall examine somewhat more closely.

The *first source* of the *Materia medica* hitherto extant is *mere guess work and fiction*, which attempts to set forth the *general therapeutic virtues* of drugs.

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Experience declares, that such a medicine very seldom performs, in the human body, what these books allege respecting its general therapeutic virtues ; and that when it does, this happens either from other causes, or it is a merely palliative passing effect (primary action),

which is certainly followed by the opposite, to the greater detriment of the patient.

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The second source of the virtues of drugs, as ascribed to them in the *materia medica*, has, it is alleged, a sure foundation, viz., *their sensible properties*, from which their action may be inferred. We shall see, however, what a turbid source this is.

I shall spare the ordinary medical school the humiliation of reminding it of the folly of those ancient physicians who, determining the medicinal powers of crude drugs from their *signature*, that is, from their colour and form, gave the testicle-shaped *Orchis-root* in order to restore manly vigour; the *phallus impudicus*, to strengthen weak erections ; ascribed to the yellow tumeric the power of curing jaundice, and considered *hypericum perforatum*, whose yellow flowers on being crushed yield a red juice (*St. John's blood*) useful in haemorrhages and wounds, &c. ; but I shall refrain from taunting the physicians of the present day with these absurdities, although traces of them are to be met with in the most modern treatises on *materia medica*.

I shall only allude to what is scarcely less foolish, to wit, the attempts, even of those of our own times, to guess the powers of medicines from their *smell* and *taste*.

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From this any one may easily see how irrational and arbitrary the maxims of the ordinary *materia medica* are, how near they are to downright falsehoods ! And to make falsehoods the basis of our system of treating the sick - what a crime !

Cinchona was found to have a bitter and astringent taste, This was quite enough for them in order to judge of its inward powers ; but now all bitter and astringent tasting substances and barks must possess *the same* medicinal powers as cinchona bark. Thus was the action of medicines on the human frame determined, in the *materia medica*, in the most unthinking and hasty manner from their taste alone !

....

Thus, the life and health of human beings were made dependent on the opinion of a few blockheads, and whatever entered, their precious brains went to swell. the *materia medica*.

....

Thus the most imperfect, the most deceptive of all the senses of civilized man, that of smell, which admits of the expression by words of so few perceptions of sensible differences - this should suffice to determine the dynamic properties of a medicine in the human organism, whilst all our senses together, employed with the utmost care, in the examination of a medicinal substance *with regard to its external properties*, do not give us any, not even the slightest information respecting this most important of all secrets, the internal immaterial power possessed by natural substances to alter the health of human beings ; in other words, respecting their true medicinal and healing power, which is so extremely different in every active substance, from that of every other, and which can only be observed when it is taken internally, and acts upon the vital functions of the organism !

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No art, be it ever so mean, has been guilty of such wanton fictions with respect to the uses and powers of its materials and tools.

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But in the arrogant medicine of the common stamp, the medicines - the tools of the healing art - are employed without the least hesitation in the most important work which one man can

perform for his brother man - a work whereon life and death, nay, sometimes the weal or wo of whole families and their descendants depends, namely, the treatment of disease ; and the acquaintance with these remedies being derived solely from their deceptive outward appearance, and from the preconceived notions and desultory classifications of teachers of *materia medica*, there is the greatest danger of deception, of error, and of falsehood: But even then, as if to conceal the effect of each individual one, several remedies are given mixed together in one prescription, with no anxiety as to the inevitable result !

So much for the unfounded allegations respecting the general therapeutic virtues of the several medicines in the *materia medica*; which are all elevated to dogmas, on a foundation of blind guess-work, preconceived ideas, extraordinary notions and presumptuous fiction. So much for this *second impure source* of the *materia medica*, as it is -called, hitherto in use !

Chemistry, also, has taken upon itself to disclose a source at which the general therapeutic properties of drugs are to be ascertained. But we shall soon see the impurity of this *third source* of the ordinary *materia medica*.

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The chemist, Gren, who knew nothing about medicine, in his *Pharmacology*, which is full of the most reckless assertions, thus holds forth to physicians : "The knowledge of the principles contained in medicines, which chemistry gives us, can alone determine the efficacy of remedies."

Knowledge indeed ! And what *knowledge* does chemistry give us with respect to. the inanimate, speechless, component parts of medicines ? Answer : It merely teaches their chemical signification, it teaches us that they act so and so with chemical re-agents, and hence are called gum, resin, albumen, mucus, earths and salts of one kind or another ; - matters of vastly little importance to the physician. These appellations tell us nothing of the changes in the sensations of the living man which may be effected by the plant or mineral, each differing from the other in its peculiar invisible, internal, essential nature ; and yet, forsooth, the whole healing art depends *on this alone* ! The manifestations of the active spirit of each individual remedial agent during its medicinal employment on human beings, can alone inform the physician of the sphere of action of the medicine, as regards its curative power. The name of each of its chemical constituents, which in most plants are almost identical, teaches him nothing on this point.

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Do Gren and his followers not perceive that chemistry can only give chemical information with respect to the presence of this or that material component part of any physical body, and that these are consequently to *chemistry* merely chemical substances ? Chemical analysis can tell us their action with chemical re-agents, and this in its proper domain ; but it can shew us neither in its dissolving nor digesting alembics, neither in its retorts nor yet in its receivers, what dynamical changes any single medicine, when brought in contact with the living organism, can produce.

Each science can only judge and throw light on subjects. within its own department ; it is folly to expect from one science information upon matters belonging to other sciences.

....

Finally, from the *fourth impure source* flowed the *clinical and special therapeutic indications for employment (ab usu in morbis)*, into the ordinary *materia medica*.

This, the most common of all the sources of the *materia medica*, whence a knowledge of the curative powers of medicines was sought to be obtained, is what is termed the practice of

physic, namely-, *the employment of medicines in actual diseases*, whereby it was imagined that information would be obtained with respect to the diseases in which this and those in which that remedy- was efficacious.

This source has been resorted to from the very beginning of the medical art, but has, from time to time, been relinquished, in order to try and hit upon some more profitable mine for the knowledge required but it was always had recourse to again, as it *appeared* the most natural method of learning the action of a medicine, and their exact uses.

Let us grant, for a moment, that this were the true way to discover their curative virtues ; one would at least, have expected that these experiments at the sick-bed would have been made with single, simple drugs only; because by mixing several together, it would never be known to which among them the result was to be ascribed. But in the records of medicine, we meet with few or no cases in which this so natural idea was ever carried into execution, viz., to give only one medicine at once in a disease, in order to be certain whether it could produce a perfect cure in that disease.

It accordingly happened, that, in almost every instance, a *mixture of medicines* was employed in diseases; and thus it could never be ascertained *for certain*, when the treatment was successful, to what ingredient of the mixture the favourable result was due; in a word, *nothing at all* was learned.

....

Hence it is undeniable, that *to ascribe any powers to a medicinal substance which was never tested purely, that is, unless along with others consequently might as well have been never tested at all, is to be guilty of deception and falsehood*

„What if all physicians were to agree from this time henceforth to turn over a new leaf, and to prescribe in every disease, only one single simple medicine ? Would we not, by this means, ascertain what each medicine is capable of curing?"

....

But what does the ordinary *materia medica* know about the vast sphere of action of a simple medicinal substance, that *materia medica* which, from impure observations of the result of the employment of *several medicines* in one disease, attributes to a drug whatever powers it has pleased the physician to ascribe to a simple ingredient of the mixture ; which never subjected the powers of a simple medicinal substance to a pure trial, that is, on a healthy individual not affected with any symptoms of disease?

....

But though it is certain that a single medicine at once is always sufficient for the rational and appropriate treatment of a disease, I am far from advising the medical world, *on that account* to prescribe simply, that is, a single medicine in each disease, *in order to ascertain what medicine is useful in this, what in that disease*, so that thereupon a *materia medica*, or treatise on the virtues of drugs *ab usu in morbis*, should be formed.

Far be it from me to advise anything of the kind, notwithstanding that this idea might seem, and has seemed, to ordinary physicians, to promise the best results.

No ! not the slightest useful addition can be either now or ever made to our knowledge of the powers of drugs, with regard to their *usus in morbus*, from observations on cases of disease even with single medicines.

This were just as foul a source as all the others above mentioned, hitherto employed. No useful truth; with respect to the curative powers of each individual medicine, could flow from it.

I shall explain myself:

Such a mode of testing medicines in diseases were only possible in two ways. Either a single drug must be tried in all diseases, in order to ascertain in which of them it is efficacious; or all drugs must be tried in a particular disease, in order to ascertain which remedy can cure it most certainly and most perfectly.

And, first, with regard to the latter of these ways ; and from it may be inferred what reliance can be placed on the former.

By an infinite number of trials of all imaginable simple substances used in domestic practice, in a *well-defined disease*, which shall constantly present the same characters, a true, certainly efficacious, specific remedy for the greater number of individuals and their friends suffering from the *same disease* might certainly be discovered, though only *casu fortuito*.

But who knows how many centuries the inhabitants of deep valleys were forced to, suffer from their goîtres before accident, after thousands of drugs and domestic nostrums had been tried in vain, put it into the head of an individual, that *roasted sponge* was the best thing for it; at all events it was not until the thirteenth century that Arnault of Villeneuve notices its *power of curing goître*.

It is well known that for many years after its first invasion, the *venereal disease* was treated in a most unsuccessful manner by the physicians of the schools, by starvation, by purgatives, arid other useless remedies, which had been employed to combat the Arabian leprosy, until at last, after many attempts and repeated trials of an innumerable multitude of things by empirical physicians on many thousands of patients who sought their aid, *mercury* was hit upon, and proved itself specific in this dreadful scourge, in spite of all the violent theoretical opposition of the pedantic physicians of the Arabian school.

The intermittent fever endemic in the marshy regions of South America, which has a great resemblance to our own *marsh ague*, had long been treated by the Peruvians, probably after innumerable trials of other drugs, with *cinchona bark*, which they found to be the most efficacious remedy, and which was first made known by them as a febrifuge to Europeans in the year 1638.

The bad consequences resulting from blows, falls, bruises and strains were long endured, ere chance revealed to the labouring classes who principally suffered from such accidents, the specific virtues of *arnica* in such cases ; at least Franz Joel was the first who, in the sixteenth century, makes mention of its virtues, and, in the eighteenth century, they were more particularly described by J. M. Fehr and J. D. Gohl, after they had become generally recognised.

Thus, after thousands upon thousands of blind trials with innumerable substances upon, perhaps, millions of individuals, the suitable, the specific remedy is at last discovered *by accident*. In order to discover the remedies for the few maladies mentioned above, there was no necessity for the employment on the part of indolent man, of that reason and mature knowledge which the Almighty has given to him, in order to enable him to free himself from those inevitable natural and other evils involving his health - the vast multitude of diseases ; - in fact, no true medical knowledge at all was required. *Mere experimenting* with all imaginable substances which might come into the head or hands was undoubtedly *sufficient* (to be sure after the lapse of perhaps hundreds of years) to enable him to discover, by accident, a suitable remedy, which never afterwards belied its specific power.

*These few specifics in these few diseases constitute all the truth which is contained in the voluminous *materia medica* in common use;* and these are, for the most part, I may say, almost entirely, derived from domestic practice.

"But if specific remedies, which were always serviceable in the above diseases, were discovered in this way, why could not some remedies against all the remaining innumerable diseases be discovered by similar experiments ?"

Because all other diseases only present themselves as individual cases of disease differing from each other, or as epidemics which have never been seen before, and will never be seen again in exactly the same form. The constant specific remedies in these few diseases were capable of being discovered by means of trying every imaginable medicinal substance, only because the thing to be cured, *the disease*, was of a *constant character*; - they are diseases which always remain the same ; some are *produced by a miasm which continues the same* through all generations, such as the venereal disease ; others have *some exciting causes*, as the ague of marshy districts, the goitre of the inhabitants of deep valleys and their outlets, and the bruises caused by falls and blows.

Had it been possible, by blind trials of all imaginable substances, to discover accidentally the suitable (specific) remedy for each of the innumerable other diseases, then must they all have been as *constant* in their nature, have appeared always in the same manner and in the same form, have shewn themselves to be always as identical in their character, as those few diseases we have mentioned.

Only for a want of a constant character can we suppose a supply of a constant character.

That it was requisite, in order to find out empirically the proper remedy, that all diseases, for which the specific was sought should be identical and preserve an invariable fixed character, appears not only to have been surmised, but to have been deeply felt by the medical community of the old school.

....

*All the uses and virtues, therefore, which the *materia medica* ascribes to different medicines, in these surreptitious and fictitious kinds of diseases, cannot make the slightest pretence to certainty.*

....

Let it not be alleged, "that not unfrequently many a severe disease - which some called by one, others by a different pathological name - was cured as if by miracle, by a simple domestic remedy, or by some medicine or prescription which accidentally fell into the hands of the physician."

No doubt this sometimes happened ; no well-informed man would deny it. But from this we can learn nothing but what we all know already, „that medicines can cure diseases ;" but from these *casus fortuiti* nothing is to be learnt ; as yet they occupy an isolated position in history, altogether useless for practice.

Our congratulations must only be bestowed on the sufferer who reaped advantage from this rare godsend, and was cured quickly (and lastingly ?) by this *accidental* remedy. But from this wonderful cure nothing at all is learned ; not the slightest addition has thereby been made to the resources of the healing art.

*On the contrary, these very chance cases of accidental cures, when they have occurred to physicians, have done most to fill the *materia medica* with false seductive declarations respecting the curative actions of particular medicines ab usu in morbis.*

For, as the ordinary physician seldom or never describes the case of disease correctly, and, indeed, considers the circumstantial description of a case of disease in all its symptoms as useless, if he cannot bestow on it a pathological name (the illusory representation of a disease above alluded to), so he does not fail to apply some illusory pathological name to his chance

case, which, together with his prescription, or the single remedy in the mixture to which alone he ascribes the cure, straightway finds its way into the *materia medica*,, which, moreover, is incapable of making, use of anything but mere pathological names of diseases in its account of the uses of medicines.

He who, thereafter, is inclined to regard a case occurring to himself as the same pathological species of disease (and why should he not? the schools teach him to do so), has nothing to do but to resort immediately to this magnificent receipt, this splendid specific, at the bidding of its first recommender, or by the advice of the *materia medica*. But he certainly has, under the same illusory pathological name, a case before him vastly different in the detail of its symptoms, and hence happens what was inevitable, the medicine does no good ; it does harm as might have been anticipated.

This is the impure, this is the unhallowed source of all the declarations respecting the curative virtues of medicines ab usu in morbis in the ordinary materia medica, whereby every imitator is led astray.

Had the so-called observers - what; they almost never did - communicated to the world those cases of lucky chance cures, *only describing minutely* the case of disease, *with all its symptoms*, and mentioning the remedy employed, they had at least written truth ; and the *materia medica* (finding no pathological name attached) had not been able to glean any lies from them. They had, I say, written truth, which, however, would only have been useful in one single way, namely, to teach every future physician the exact case of disease beyond which the remedy, in order to prove useful, should not be employed ; and thus no false, and consequently unsuccessful, imitation would have occurred. From such an accurate description it would have been evident to all future physicians that the same, *the exact same*, case of disease *never recurs* in nature, consequently could never again be cured miraculously.

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So turbid and impure are the sources of the ordinary materia medica, and so null and void its contents !

What a healing art, with such ill-understood medicines !

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In order to treat successfully the other cases of disease occurring in man, and which, be. they acute or chronic, differ so vastly among each other, if they cannot be referred to some primary disease which is constant in its character, they must each be regarded as peculiar diseases, and a medicine which in its pure effects on the healthy body shews symptoms similar to those of the case before us, must be administered.

This improved healing art, *i. e.*, the homoeopathic, draws not its knowledge from those *impure sources of the materia medica hitherto in use*, pursues not that antiquated, dreamy, false path we have just pointed out, but follows the way consonant with nature. It administers *no* medicines to combat the diseases of mankind *before* testing their pure effects ; that is, observing what changes they can produce in the health of a healthy man - this is pure *materia medica*.

Thus alone can the power of medicines on the human health be known ; thus alone can their true importance, the peculiar action of each drug, be exhibited clearly and manifestly, without any fallacy, any deception, independent of all speculation ; in their symptoms thus ascertained, all their curative elements lie disclosed ; and among them may be found a signalization of all the cases of disease which each fitting (specific) remedy is capable of curing.

According to this improved system of medicine, cases of disease, in all their endless variety of appearance (if they cannot be traced back to some more profoundly rooted primary disease of constant character), must be regarded in every instance as new, and never before seen ; they must be noted, exactly as they present themselves, with all the symptoms, accidents and altered sensations discoverable in them ; and a remedy must be selected which as has been shewn by previous experiments of its action on perfect health, is capable of producing symptoms, accidents, and altered sensations most similar to those of the case under treatment; and such a medicine, given in a very small dose, cures, as experience teaches, much better and more perfectly than any other method of treatment.

This doctrine of the pure effects of medicines promises no delusive, fabulous remedies for names of diseases, imagines no general therapeutic virtues of drugs, but unostentatiously possesses the elements of cure for diseases accurately known (that is, investigated in all their symptoms ; and he who will take the trouble to choose the remedy for a disease by the rule of the most perfect similarity will ever find in it a pure inexhaustible source whence he may derive the means for saving the lives of his fellow-men.

LEIPZIG, April, 1817; and CÖTHEN, January, 1852