

This letter to the editor first appeared in *Homeopathy Today* (2000, Vol 20, December: 23-25), the newsletter of the National Center for Homeopathy, Alexandria, VA, USA, (www.homeopathic.org) edited by Julian Winston. It is presented here with kind permission.

This letter to the editor is a reply to the letter of Asa Hershoff "Healing Plants: The Undiscovered Country". Steven Olsen criticizes the doctrine of signature and the arbitrariness of the supposed connections.

" ... one has to admit that all the plants and minerals could exist without us, so why would they need to have any relationship to human qualities. ... The theory of signatures boasts of some unseen mystical powers in the universe that planned out all these relationships - no such powers have been demonstrated."

Steve Olsen

The doctrine of signatures

Dear Editor,

In the January 2000 issue of *Homeopathy Today* there was an article by Asa Hershoff, called "The Undiscovered Country". He makes the proposition that correspondence between the provings and the substance is perhaps not a coincidence: "The fact that such a relationship does exist, and that this information is - somehow - within each separate species of plant ...".

In almost every journal or seminar there is some reference to this idea and it seems to have become very popular lately. I am concerned that there is too much emphasis on it and wonder, at what point does it create confusion and a distortion of reality? The idea I am referring to is the doctrine of signatures. This theory has never been scientifically examined or explained. Hahnemann spoke of this as "the folly of those ancient physicians ... determining the medicinal powers of crude drugs from their signature."

What concerns me is the fact that it is so inconsistent. For example, one hears that *Aurum* (gold) is for people who feel worthless, so they need gold to feel the opposite (i.e., confident in themselves); but *Platina* (platinum) is for people who feel haughty (i.e., too rare and special). If the theory was consistent then *Platina* should be for people who feel less than others and insignificant or *Aurum* for people who feel too wealthy. Why does *Adamas* (diamond) feel less than others and *Ferrum* (iron) feel ready to fight? Diamond one would think, would have a feeling of perfection, when in fact, they feel a lack of identity and imperfect.

Homeopathy is based on facts, not theory. The fact is that with any remedy there are a lot of symptoms and a lot of associations one can make about it concerning its name, where it grows, what it looks like, and what it can be used for.

With so much information there will likely be a significant statistical possibility of finding some coincidental correspondences. For example, a local homeopath in one of his classes said that *Taraxacum* (Dandelion) belongs to the Lion group of remedies - because some of the symptoms are similar, he says. Does he actually believe that the name of the plant was brought about by some magical design, or is he sure it is just a coincidence? The problem is that he was not clear in his explanation, and this leads the unsuspecting student to believe there is some type of fate or magical intelligence out there that can create these correspondences. This is the complete breakdown of logic. If this is true then one can make up endless stories, for example, that *Ruta graveolens* must be for people who are afraid of

graves and cemetery because the word "grave" is part of the name of the remedy (*Ruta graveolens*). Or that *Hamamelis virginica* works better for virgins.

It is a matter of how much and at what point this misinformation influences people or influences what remedy they choose to give. I think it is the students who are gullible, innocent and ready to be lead down the garden path - they are fooled most often.

I would be willing to make one exception and that is if the substance proved was made from or contained many parts of an animal, especially its hormones. Only after the proving is completed can one see which characteristics came through - but they would not be exactly like the animal because that combination of hormones would affect humans in a unique way.

This is not true for plants because many of the molecules they produce are for defense, such as poisons in their leaves or bark so that they won't be eaten by insects or birds. The proving often is of this poison, and no one can claim the plant or tree feels like the poison - only the poor beast that dares to eat it.

Also one has to admit that all the plants and minerals could exist without us, so why would they need to have any relationship to human qualities. such as *Hypericum* having so called "puncture wounds" in it leaves as *Ferrum* being used for weapons. Iron does not care if it is used as a weapon - it is surely by accident that we have found this use for it. And if some of the proving symptoms suggest defense such as: "least contradiction angers" (C. Hering), then it is not logical to assume this image of "war" or "sword fighting" or "defense" is somehow not a coincidence. In fact most of the proving symptoms of *Ferrum* have nothing to do with aggression. Iron has a thousand other uses in daily life; why are these not in the proving? If this was not by chance, then the proving of *Taxus* - the Yew tree, should be about fighting with bows and arrows since this was the wood most preferred through history for making bows. In fact, there is nothing in the proving to support this.

The theory of signatures boasts of some unseen mystical powers in the universe that planned out all these relationships - no such powers have been demonstrated. There is no real connection except by coincidence, but this shrewd use of coincidence is used to lull the unsuspecting student into being a true believer of absurdity. It has the tendency to make the student look for these correspondences and build a story that distorts the information about the remedy to the point where they may not prescribe it when it is needed, or they may give it when it is not needed. What I fear the most is that this misinformation derived from signatures will end up in the repertory or materia medica. We are not in the business of constructing fairy tales; these are actual sick people in front of us every day, they deserve to be treated with some foundation in reality. I think if these theories are to be taken seriously then they have to be based on some evidence that is stronger than mere coincidence. As Hahnemann said in his footnote to the First Aphorism: The calling of the physician "is not to weave so-called systems of fancy ideas and hypotheses about the inner nature of the vital processes ... nor does it consist of holding forth unintelligible words or abstract and pompous expressions in an effort to appear learned so as to astonish the ignorant, while the world in sickness cries in vain for help."

Sincerely,

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