Homeopathic medicine: Real or placebo? A narrative review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Homeopathy, founded in the late 18th century, is based on the principles of "like cures like" and extreme dilution. Despite its long-standing use, it remains highly controversial: scientific reviews consistently show no efficacy beyond placebo, yet public support persists. This raises ethical concerns when patients delay evidence-based care. In Islamic contexts, opinions differ regarding its legitimacy and the permissibility of alcohol-based dilutions. This review evaluates homeopathy from scientific, ethical, and Islamic perspectives to address these unresolved debates. **Materials and Methods:** This narrative review was conducted using a structured literature search guided by the PRISMA approach. Scientific databases including PubMed, Cochrane Library, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect were searched for peer-reviewed articles related to homeopathy, scientific validity, placebo effects, and Islamic medical ethics. Focus was given to studies published in English from 2000 onward, particularly systematic reviews, randomized controlled trials, meta-analyses and scholarly discussions on religious and ethical implications. The initial search identified more than 150 articles. However, due to limitations in scope and relevance to the final write-up, only 29 of these articles were selected and used as references in this paper. **Results:** Early evidence, such as the study by Linde et al. (1997), suggested that homeopathy might provide benefits greater than placebo. However, these findings were later challenged by systematic reviews and meta-analyses, including the NHMRC report (2015) and Shang et al. (2005), which found no consistent evidence supporting homeopathy's efficacy beyond placebo. Reported benefits were often associated with subjective conditions such as pain, fatigue, and anxiety, where belief, patient–physician interaction, and empathetic consultation may have enhanced placebo responses. A Cochrane review concluded that there is no conclusive evidence for homeopathy in the treatment of acute respiratory infections. Similarly, Hamre et al. (2023) reported that five out of six meta-analyses showed positive effects, but all had a high risk of bias. Smaller randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have also reported mild benefits in chronic conditions; however, these results lacked replication and consistency. Overall, perceived improvements were largely linked to placebo effects and patient–physician interaction. Ethically, critics argue that promoting homeopathy risks delaying effective treatment and undermining evidence-based care. From an Islamic perspective, treatment is encouraged when it is effective, safe, and Shariah-compliant. The permissibility of alcohol-based dilutions depends on the source, quantity, and necessity, with most scholars advising caution due to unclear efficacy. **Conclusion:** Current scientific evidence does not support homeopathy as an effective pharmacological treatment. Despite this, its popularity persists, driven by cultural beliefs, patient-reported benefits, and perceived psychological comfort. From an Islamic perspective, homeopathy may be considered permissible if it is not harmful; however, scholarly opinions remain divided due to the lack of scientific validation and concerns about alcohol content in some remedies. Although generally regarded as low-risk, homeopathy should not replace evidence-based treatments for serious conditions. Increased awareness and further research are essential, particularly within Muslim communities, to promote ethical and informed healthcare decisions.

Keywords: Homeopathy, alternative medicine, evidence-based medicine, clinical