

# SA homeopaths' attitudes towards conventional medicine

**To the Editor:** Alternative health encompasses a wide field that includes diagnosis, treatment and intervention. There are more than 150 treatment modalities as well as many diagnostic modalities.<sup>1</sup> The most common reasons for making use of alternative medicine include increased diagnostic and therapeutic options, psychological stress diffusion and better doctor-patient relationships.<sup>1</sup> People are increasingly making use of alternative medicine. A study that included 1 500 American adults determined that 33% had made use of alternative medicine in 1990 with an increase to 42% in 1997.<sup>2</sup> Between 20% to 65% of the European population makes use of alternative medicine.<sup>3</sup> In 1997, the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital saw a 33% increase in referrals.<sup>4</sup> In South Africa, more homeopathic medication has become available and the sales thereof increase yearly by 15% to 20%.<sup>4</sup> Homeopathy is the second largest field that is registered with the South African Complementary Medical Association.<sup>5</sup> Previous studies have shown that conventional practitioners have a positive attitude towards alternative medicine.<sup>6,7</sup> One study showed that all Glasgow general practitioners have at some time referred patients to the Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital.<sup>4</sup> The attitude of homeopaths towards conventional medicine is, however, not known. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate South African homeopaths' attitudes towards conventional medicine.

## Methods

For this descriptive study, a list of all registered homeopaths (n = 654) was obtained from the South African Complimentary Medical Association. The homeopaths were numbered alphabetically and 100 names were randomly chosen. The selected homeopaths were informed telephonically of the study and asked if they would participate. In the event that the selected homeopath could not be contacted or was unwilling to take part, the next homeopath on the list was selected. A questionnaire was sent (by post, fax or e-mail) to the consenting homeopaths. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information, homeopaths' perception of conventional medicine and homeopaths' willingness to collaborate with conventional doctors. Four homeopaths (two from Bloemfontein and two from Pretoria) took part in a pilot study. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State, approved the study.

## Results

Of 100 questionnaires, 81 were returned and 63% of the homeopaths were male. Most homeopaths were from Gauteng. The distribution of respondents' location is given in Table I.

**Table I:** Distribution of location of respondents

Province	%	Province	%	Province	%
Gauteng	40%	Free State	6%	Mpumalanga	2%
Western Cape	26%	Eastern Cape	5%	North West	2%
KwaZulu-Natal	16%	Limpopo	2%	Northern Cape	1%

Approximately 55% were between the ages of 30 and 49 years. Most homeopaths (52%) qualified in the 1990s, followed by the 1970s (26%), 2000+ (4%) and before 1970 (2%). Training institutions where respondents were trained included the SA Faculty of Homeopathy, Wits University, Technikon Natal and institutions in the United Kingdom and France. Some homeopaths (14%) had a MBChB degree. Additional qualifications (70%) included acupuncture, reflexology, chiropractic and naturalism. Homeopaths' attitudes towards additional treatment and conventional medicine are given in Table II.

**Table II:** Homeopaths' attitudes towards additional treatment and conventional medicine

Variable		Percentage
Takes other treatment into account	Never	1
	Seldom	3
	Always	96
Knowledge regarding conventional medicine	Bad	1
	Average	23
	Good	49
	Excellent	27
Attitudes towards conventional medicine	Negative	14
	Neutral	28
	Positive	58

Most homeopaths (98%) treated patients who made use of other modalities such as conventional medicine, dietetics, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, chiropractic, reflexology and aromatherapy. All homeopaths stated that they were better equipped than conventional medical practitioners to treat some conditions. These included asthma, rheumatism, chronic illnesses, skin conditions, weak immune systems and allergies. Most (95%) homeopaths stated that conventional medicine was better equipped to treat certain conditions. These included emergencies, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, orthopaedic conditions, surgical problems and cancer. Regarding possible co-operation between conventional medicine and homeopathy, 99% of homeopaths were in favour thereof, 83% were willing to inform conventional doctors about homeopathy and 73% were willing to learn more about conventional medicine. Those who were not prepared to learn more about conventional medicine mostly gave the reason that they were too old.

## Discussion

More has been written about medical practitioners' view on homeopathy than vice versa.<sup>8</sup> Homeopathic management regimes are undergoing more scrutiny and their effects are being scientifically measured.<sup>9</sup> In our study of South African resident homeopathic practitioners we have measured willingness for dialogue, discussion and co-operation with medical practitioners. This is an opportunity that South African medical practitioners should make use of.

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