

Memory of water

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Having trained as a physician in Vienna and practised as a doctor in the German mining town of Hettstedt, Samuel Hahnemann became increasingly disillusioned with the medical establishment's attitude towards treatment.

In 1790, Hahnemann translated the distinguished Scottish physician William Cullen's *Materia Medica* into German. He took issue with Cullen's explanation of how Peruvian cinchona bark (in which quinine would be isolated 28 years later) cured fever, and decided to experiment with it on himself.

Hahnemann established the theory that the symptoms of sickness were a reflection of the "untuning" of the *vis vitalis* - the life force thought to differentiate organic from inorganic matter. Working from the principle *Similia similibus curentur*, "like cures like", Hahnemann began to experiment on himself and his family.

In 1805 he published a directory of the symptoms induced by different medicines and developed his ideas into a practical system of treatment, which he called homeopathy. Hahnemann himself was subjected to professional attacks, but homeopathy gradually grew in popularity in Europe. Its moment of triumph came in 1813 with Hahnemann's apparent success in treating typhus patients in Leipzig.

The central tenets of homeopathy - that like cures like and the more a solution is diluted the more potent it becomes - have changed little since Hahnemann's time. The practice achieved its greatest notoriety in 1988, when *Nature* published a paper by French immunologist Jacques Benveniste. He observed that white blood cells still demonstrated an allergic response to water in which allergens had been diluted to homeopathic doses. Benveniste's conclusion was that water somehow retained a "memory" of the molecules it once contained. A subsequent investigation by a *Nature*-appointed team criticised the working environment of his lab and his statistical analysis, but found no evidence of fraud.

The subject remains deeply controversial. Researchers regularly claim to have replicated Benveniste's findings, or to have disproved homeopathy entirely. Today, despite attempts to undermine his theories, Hahnemann's 200-year-old medicinal art accounts for 0.5% of the world's pharmaceuticals market.