



Homeopathy Therapeutically Uses Homeopathic Medicines, but Also Narratives, which are Integrated into Compassionate Care: A Comparison between Homeopathic Medicine and Narrative Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Homeopathy, founded about two centuries ago by Samuel Hahnemann, is a clinical methodology based on the *law of similarity* and, both in diagnosis and therapy, takes this fundamental law into account. During homeopathic treatments, *small doses* of substances are administered which, if administered in *high doses*, would produce symptoms *similar* to those that need to be treated. In a homeopathic treatment, homeopathic medicines are used therapeutically, but also narratives, which are integrated into a compassionate treatment, typically Hahnemannian, supported by a clinically holistic, global, human approach, guided by compassion and the awareness that *similar* is cured by *similar*: *similia similibus curentur*. Homeopathy, which today also makes use of important knowledge acquired with rigorous scientific research, homeopathically uses narratives in an integrative therapeutic function, therefore, we consider a comparison between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine useful, interesting and scientifically constructive.

Keywords: homeopathy, homeopathic medicine, narrative medicine, narratives, law of similarity.

INTRODUCTION

Homeopathy is a therapy based on the so-called *law of similarity*, *similia similibus curentur*, and this law is constantly respected both in diagnosis and therapy. The *law of similarity*, or *law of similars*, has very ancient origins: "The principle of therapeutic similarity (*similia similibus curentur*) is the main scientific foundation and was described by several exponents of medicine since Hippocrates in ancient Greece" [1]. The undisputed founder of homeopathy was Samuel Hahnemann: "Hahnemann challenged prevailing medical norms, emphasizing individualized treatment and minimal dosing, significantly influencing modern healthcare. Despite considerable opposition, his innovations established a new medical paradigm that

inspires practitioners and patients today” [2]. It is interesting to remember that “Hahnemann is recognized as a pioneer in compassionate healthcare” [2], furthermore, it is important to underline that “compassionate care is a fundamental component of healthcare today” [3], finally, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by *compassion* : “Compassion is the deep feeling that arises when confronted with another's suffering coupled with a strong desire to alleviate that suffering” [4]. It is very interesting, in this context, to compare the meaning of *compassion* with another interesting meaning that emerges from some important scientific data: “Neuroscience and social science evidence support the idea that compassion mitigates burnout and systems that promote compassionate care must be developed” [4]. Based on this interesting comparison, and taking into account that “compassionate care is a fundamental component of healthcare today” [3], it is possible to carefully reflect on the important intuitions of the founder of homeopathy, Hahnemann, who is recognized as a pioneer in compassionate healthcare. It is therefore necessary to take into account that in homeopathy compassion characterizes the clinical approach according to which narratives are also *integrated* into compassionate care. The integration of narrative into homeopathic care is extremely important to support the healing process, in fact, “both the osteopaths and homeopaths learn that narratives are integral to both 'diagnosis' and the healing process itself” [5]. Based on what has been said and documented, we believe that a scientific comparison between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine is useful, interesting and scientifically constructive for two specific reasons. First reason: narrative medicine recognizes the importance of narratives, in fact, “narrations have come to influence medicine, giving rise to a new approach called 'narrative medicine’” [6], and homeopathic medicine also recognizes the importance of narratives, so much so that “both the osteopaths and homeopaths learn that narratives are integral to both 'diagnosis' and the healing process itself” [5]. Second reason: in narrative medicine compassion is extremely important, just think of the title of the cited article, “Narrative medicine. The patient as 'text', object and subject of compassion” [6], and also in homeopathic medicine compassion is extremely important, just think that “Hahnemann is recognized as a pioneer in compassionate healthcare” [2]. These reasons, in addition to orienting our study towards a comparison between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine, also allow us to determine the differences and similarities existing between two medical disciplines that, although using different methods, give great importance to narration inserted in the context of compassionate care.

METHODS

To further the study on the meaning that narration acquires in the context of the homeopathic approach and to make a comparison between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine we have carried out a systematic bibliographic research and we have used the electronic biomedical database PubMed/MEDLINE, the web search engine Google Scholar and the Google search engine. During the bibliographic research, we have constantly taken into account the authoritativeness of the authors of the articles and the affiliations.

RESULTS

The results of our bibliographic research highlight the importance of narration in both homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine. Although homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine are two different methodologies, both enhance the meaning of narration, and this can be affirmed based on the contents acquired during our bibliographic research. For clarity of exposition, below are cited separately the articles regarding homeopathic

medicine and the articles regarding narrative medicine, furthermore, some significant passages taken from the various articles are cited in order to highlight the importance that narration acquires in both methodologies.

Narrative Medicine

The authoritative Rita Charon states: "I first used the phrase 'narrative medicine' in 2000 to refer to clinical practice fortified by narrative competence—the ability to recognize, absorb, metabolize, interpret, and be moved by stories of illness. Simply, it is medicine practiced by someone who knows what to do with stories" [7]. The authoritative Kirmayer *et al.* clearly state: "This chapter reviews the key principles of narrative medicine and its central importance for person-centered medical care. The last two decades have seen the emergence of narrative medicine as a complement to biomedical approaches. Narratives are the vehicles through which patients understand and communicate their health problems, past history, and current concerns. Clinicians, in turn, offer narrative accounts of the nature of symptoms and illness that make sense of patients' suffering, clarify its potential course and outcome, and provide a rationale for specific treatment interventions" [8]. In an authoritative article by Rita Charon it is stated: "The effective practice of medicine requires narrative competence, that is, the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others. Medicine practiced with narrative competence, called narrative medicine, is proposed as a model for humane and effective medical practice" [9]. In an authoritative article by Mohanti, the reasons why narrative medicine can also prove useful in the treatment of cancer are clearly explained: "Narrative medicine (NM) is a new discipline in healthcare that helps the patients and physicians to tell and listen to the accounts of disease, illness, and suffering. In the last 20 years, NM has moved into the realms of biomedical education, research, and training. The complexity of cancer management can gain from the medical humanism of NM" [10]. In an authoritative article by Florijn *et al.* a study of narrative medicine in the oncology field is presented and what is stated by the authoritative authors is extremely interesting: "This narrative medicine study could potentially teach physicians they should discuss impending death to prevent the use of an invasive medical treatment that typically extends the quantity, but not the quality, of life" [11]. Based on the articles cited, it can be well understood that narrative medicine can be applied in oncology [10, 11], but also in surgery [12], pediatrics [13], psychiatry [14], dentistry [15], clinical genetics [16], internal medicine [17], orthopedics [18], ophthalmology [19], neurology [20]. In short, narrative medicine can be helpful in different fields and narration can facilitate the doctor-patient approach.

Homeopathic Medicine

The results of our bibliographical research must necessarily take into account the *Organon*, a capital work of homeopathy, written by Samuel Hahnemann. Reading this work one clearly understands how important narration is in homeopathy. Hahnemann, in fact, maintains that the doctor must let the patient and relatives speak, without interrupting them, except in the case in which they make useless digressions, and the reason why there must be no interruptions is very simple: "Every interruption breaks the thread of the narrator" [21]. Therefore, the homeopath takes care of "the narrator", listens and observes the patient carefully, and does not interrupt him uselessly. By carefully reading paragraph 84 of the *Organon*, it is clear that, during the homeopathic visit, it is necessary to establish a narrative tension between the doctor and the patient, between the homeopath and the "narrator", between the one who cures and the one who must be cured also through careful, targeted,

competent listening thanks to which the diagnosis is specified and the therapy is personalized. Based on all this, and taking into account that the homeopath is very concerned about the “narrator”, we believe that a comparison between traditional homeopathic medicine and modern narrative medicine can provide excellent food for scientific reflection. To facilitate the comparison, some passages from authoritative articles are cited below, passages that provide important clarifications on the basis of which it is easy to understand the great significance that homeopathy attributes to clinical narration. In an authoritative article by Davidson and Jonas it is stated that individualized homeopathy, IH, includes elements of narrative medicine: “IH includes elements found in humanistic therapy and narrative medicine and additionally incorporates idiographic material in treatment selection” [22]. In an authoritative article by Gale it is stated: “Both the osteopaths and homeopaths learn that narratives are integral to both 'diagnosis' and the healing process itself” [5]. In an authoritative article by Konitzer *et al.* it is stated: “The results justify further investigation of the narrative and metaphorical properties of the therapeutic encounter in homeopathy” [23]. In an authoritative article by Hartog it is stated: “The homeopathic model is based on holism and comprehension of the totality of the patient and uses patient-centered communication with a high degree of physician co-operation, empathy, hopefulness, enablement and narrative competence, all of which can improve outcomes” [24].

DISCUSSION

The results of our bibliographic research allow us to make a comparison between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine, two disciplines that pay much attention to the importance of narratives. While narrative medicine is a “clinical practice fortified by narrative competence” [7], homeopathic medicine is a clinical methodology based on the law of similarity that therapeutically uses homeopathic medicines, but also narratives, so much so that “homeopaths learn that narratives are integral to both 'diagnosis' and the healing process itself” [5]. In homeopathy, narratives are “integrated” into the diagnosis, into the healing process and into compassionate care. It is useful to reiterate that “Hahnemann is recognized as a pioneer in compassionate healthcare” [2], furthermore, we must take into account a fact: homeopathy, since its origins, for about two centuries, has always recognized the importance of clinical narration. In fact, in the *Organon*, capital work of homeopathy written about two centuries ago, Hahnemann emphasizes the importance of listening carefully to the patients and to the “narrator”, without creating interruptions, except when useless digressions are made, to be precise, Hahnemann states that “every interruption breaks the thread of the narrator” [21]. The founder of homeopathy, therefore, shows a lot of interest towards the “narrator” [21]. This concept is important: “In essence, Hahnemann clearly places the emphasis on listening and speaking, on the need to communicate through an orderly exposition and on the importance of maintaining a regular and continuous narration that must not be interrupted, otherwise the interruption 'breaks the thread of thought of the narrator'. In the case in which useless digressions are made, the interruption is permitted, but this must absolutely not interrupt the communication, the doctor-patient relationship, the narrative tension that is established during the homeopathic visit. This is why homeopathy, in a certain sense, cannot fail to be narrative medicine” [25]. According to Rita Charon, narrative medicine is “clinical practice fortified by narrative competence”, in short, “simply, it is medicine practiced by someone who knows what to do with stories” [7]. According to what emerges from the studies cited in this article, homeopaths certainly know what to do with stories: “The 'drug picture' as the remedy's story and the history as the patient's story

metaphorize the narrative quality of homeopathy. Even the doctor's attitude cannot be understood without referring to the narrative background of homeopathy" [23]. This is why homeopathic medicine, in a certain sense, cannot but be narrative medicine and even, in the homeopathic field, one could hypothesize the definition of narrative homeopathic medicine. Despite the methodological differences existing between the two disciplines, the comparison and between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine arises spontaneously: if modern narrative medicine emphasizes the importance of the "narrative", ancient homeopathy places great attention on "who narrates". It seems that homeopathy, despite having ancient origins, is also interesting in modern times, and also in this case, comparing it with modern narrative medicine, it shows all its cultural and scientific value. If it is true that nowadays homeopathy is scientifically studied in different fields, even in oncology [26], it is also true that it must be further experimented in the future so that the mechanisms that make it effective in the treatment of different pathologies can be fully understood. Pathologies are treated homeopathically with so-called *small doses*, with *ultra-diluted* doses, with homeopathic medicines, but they are also treated with narratives because, as already said, "homeopaths learn that narratives are integral to both 'diagnosis' and the healing process itself" [5]. In short, the *homeopathic-narrative* tension that is established during the doctor-patient relationship is extremely significant and the homeopath is certainly an important component of the therapeutic context, as stated in an authoritative article by Eyles *et al.*: "This study shows the homeopath as an important component of the therapeutic context forming complex relationships and using communication that is skills based and inductively shaped to interpret and respond to each individual patient and their narrative in the consultation" [27]. The homeopathic doctor, in short, acquires a very important role during the therapy because, in a certain sense, he uses himself as a therapeutic instrument to the point of becoming the first medicine: "medicus prima medicina" [28]. The doctor, being the first medicine, cannot be replaced even by a very powerful machine created with artificial intelligence. Although artificial intelligence can help the homeopath during his professional activity, it must be recognized that listening to the doctor is different from listening to a robot [29] and, above all, it must be kept in mind that empathy and compassion acquire a profoundly human meaning if they are naturally generated by a human being and not by a machine. Empathy, as the authoritative anthropologist Mauro Minervino states, is a natural force of resonance: "The doctor, who practices homeopathy, as a homeopathic remedy also uses empathy, a natural force of resonance" [30]. In homeopathy this natural force of resonance is used together with all the other natural and human forces that converge in the complex and articulated homeopathic, holistic treatment, carried out with the appropriate prescription of homeopathic medicines, but also with the use of healthy and effective narratives. Narratives, to be homeopathically effective, must be wisely integrated into truly compassionate and truly homeopathic care.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the scientific literature consulted, we believe that the scientific comparison between homeopathic medicine and narrative medicine is extremely interesting because, in both disciplines, listening, empathy, compassion and narration prove to be therapeutically important and extremely significant.

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