

# Homeopathy and acupuncture: Do they have place in respiratory medicine

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According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine, **complementary and alternative medicine** (CAM) or “complementary health approaches” are “a group of diverse medical and health care practices and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine”. It is used alongside modern medicine (complementary medicine) or as an alternative to it (alternative medicine)<sup>1</sup>.

This article will review international database for two methods of CAM: homeopathy and acupuncture.

**Homeopathy** is an alternative approach based on the belief that pharmaceutical substances, which are manufactured in a particular way and which are used in very small quantities, treat physical and mental illnesses.

From its first appearance, homeopathy’s popularity has fluctuated, reaching its heyday in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when schools of homeopathy, institutes, as well as hospitals, were created. Yet, in the last decade, it has been severely criticized by scientists. From 2000 on, there have been hundreds of studies and reviews on the effectiveness of homeopathy, comparing it to a placebo, to the drugs used in classical medicine, and the comparison of different methods used in homeopathy.

While some studies have shown positive results regarding the effectiveness of homeopathy for treatment of respiratory tract infections, allergic rhinitis, chronic asthma, IPF and lung cancer<sup>3-7</sup>, they were not evaluated either due to the small number of participants or the poor quality of trials. What is more, publication bias was ascertained<sup>8-10</sup>.

On the contrary, other studies, reviews and meta-analyses did not find enough evidence that homeopathic medicinal products are more effective than a placebo<sup>2,8,10-12</sup>.

Consequently, in 2017, Great Britain’s National Health Service begins to discourage the use of homeopathic medication<sup>13,14</sup>, characterizing homeopathy as a form of treatment devoid of “robust evidence of clinical effectiveness”.

In addition, in 2015 NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) in Australia, after the analysis of 57 systematic reviews based on only major, good quality studies, concluded that homeopathy does not differ from placebos regarding its effectiveness due to the fact that “there were no health conditions for which there was reliable evidence that ho-

meopathy was effective"<sup>15</sup>. The Australian government stops insurance reimbursement for 17 CAM, including homeopathy.

However, in Switzerland, in 2017, the country's government announced that four methods of alternative medicine, which included homeopathy, would be covered by basic health insurance coverage on condition that it is "practiced by conventional medical practitioners who have an additional qualification in one of the four disciplines"<sup>16</sup>.

The conflict regarding homeopathy continues.

J.E. Prousky supports that it is not the homeopathic remedy itself, but the homeopathic consultation process as a psychotherapeutic technique that can provide a therapeutic result, given that it includes the recording of a detailed individual and family history, regular follow-up and a trusting relationship between patient and therapist<sup>17</sup>.

Some researchers are looking into the application of homeopathic remedies for non-complicated respiratory infections in order to avoid inappropriate use of antibiotics<sup>18</sup>.

Yet, it must be noted that the World Health Organization does not recommend the use of homeopathic remedies for diarrhoea and flu in infants, and warns against their use in the treatment of serious diseases, such as HIV, tuberculosis and malaria.

**Acupuncture** is a key component of Chinese traditional medicine and it is defined as the stimulation of specific points on the body using a variety of techniques such as needling, moxibustion, cupping, acupressure, and newer techniques like electroacupuncture and the use of lasers on acupuncture points.

Acupuncture has been used in China and other Asian countries for approximately 4000 years and has become a popular form of alternative medicine in America and Europe as a treatment for a vast list of diseases, particularly for pain conditions. Hundreds of studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of acupuncture on respiratory diseases (bronchial asthma, COPD, infections, allergic rhinitis and cystic fibrosis)<sup>19,21-24</sup>. Attempts have been made to investigate the biological effects of acupuncture mechanisms<sup>25,26</sup>.

Nevertheless, opinions on acupuncture are divided, and quite a few scientists support that the positive results of this method are based on a powerful placebo effect<sup>25,27</sup> and they accuse acupuncturists of publication bias<sup>28</sup> and poor study design.

One of acupuncture use is for smoking cessation through the implementation of techniques such as nee-

ding, acupressure and the use of lasers on acupuncture points. Some studies have shown positive effects<sup>29,30</sup>, whereas the Cochrane Review, in 2014, uncovered that acupuncture is less efficient in comparison with nicotine substituting treatment and that its effect is similar to a placebo<sup>31</sup>.

Various acupuncture techniques have exhibited different complications. In 2013, a systematic review<sup>32</sup> compiled the adverse side-effects from case reports. The most frequent complications were skin infections (bacterial and viral), organ injuries (pneumothorax, central or peripheral nervous system trauma, heart and major vessel trauma), burns and hemorrhaging complications. It is reported that complications were most frequently associated with the experience of the acupuncturist and a lack of compliance with sterilizing techniques.

**In conclusion**, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is widely implemented on a global scale. The clinical findings regarding the effectiveness of these two CAM techniques (homeopathy and acupuncture) are controversial. The existing database does not support the use of these methods to treat respiratory diseases. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that with the implementation of these methods, one runs the risk of delaying treatments recommended by classical medicine, with negative consequences that may entail for the patient's health. In addition, these CAM methods can provoke serious complications, especially when practiced by incompetent practitioners. In any case, neither the ERS nor the ATS include these techniques in the guidelines pertaining to the treatment of any respiratory diseases.

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