

Harris L. Coulter

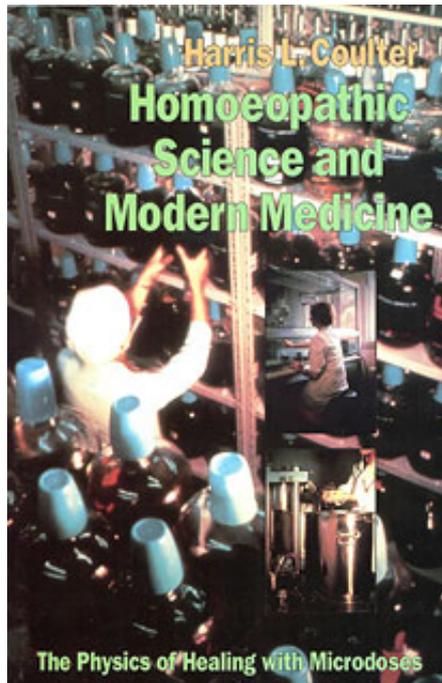
Homoeopathic Science and Modern Medicine

Leseprobe

[Homoeopathic Science and Modern Medicine](#)

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Herausgeber: North Atlantic Books



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Preface

Homoeopathy Revisited

The homoeopathic movement is one of the most intriguing phenomena in the history of medicine. Since the doctrine was announced in the early 1800's by its originator, Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), there has at all times been a group of physicians who, although trained in the accepted approach to medicine and healing, have nonetheless preferred the homoeopathic alternative. This alternative consists of a series of therapeutic assumptions which are entirely opposed to the basic tenets of orthodox medicine (by "orthodox" medicine we mean the "scientific" medical tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—also known as allopathy). For 180 years the practitioners of homoeopathy have refused to be integrated into the orthodox tradition and have led an autonomous existence somewhere on the fringe of medical thought and practice.

The existence of this competing group has always been a source of peculiar discomfiture to medical orthodoxy. Regular physicians could regard with equanimity the various attacks of uneducated practitioners, but the homoeopaths from the very beginning have been at least as well educated as the regular physicians themselves. Most are graduates of the orthodox schools and know orthodox medicine from the inside.

At the same time they have been strongly critical of the orthodox procedures.

Because medical orthodoxy since Hahnemann's day (and before) has regarded its own doctrines as "scientific," and hence not susceptible of fundamental theoretical reconstruction, these practitioners could never grant recognition to a doctrine which attacked the very foundations of their system of practice. They could not take a dispassionate view of homoeopathy, since any admission of virtue in homoeopathy was, and is, equivalent to criticizing medical "science."

In every country the adoption of homoeopathy by a sizable number of practitioners has split the medical profession into two irreconcilable groups. In the United States the formation of the American Institute of Homoeopathy in 1844 was the direct cause of the founding of the American Medical Association two years later. For sixty years the AMA was vehemently hostile to the homoeopaths. Regardless of the fact that many of the latter had graduated from Harvard, Dartmouth, Pennsylvania, and other leading medical schools, they were refused admittance to the orthodox medical societies. Professional consultation with a homoeopath was punished by ostracism and expulsion from these same medical societies.

These measures were not sufficient, however, to arrest the growth of homoeopathy, and during the latter half of the nineteenth century it was extremely widespread in New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the Midwest. Being identified with New England transcendentalism, the doctrine made little headway in the South until the homoeopathic record in the 1878 yellow fever epidemic led to the conversion of many patients and physicians. Homoeopathy also had strongholds in Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, and California, and individual practitioners could be found in every state and territory.

In 1890 there were about 14,000 homoeopaths in the country, as against about 85,000 "regular" physicians. In the areas of homoeopathy's greatest popularity, however, the proportion of homoeopathic physicians to regular ones was higher—perhaps one to four or one to five. Furthermore, it was admitted on all sides that the social, intellectual, political, and business elite of every community patronized the

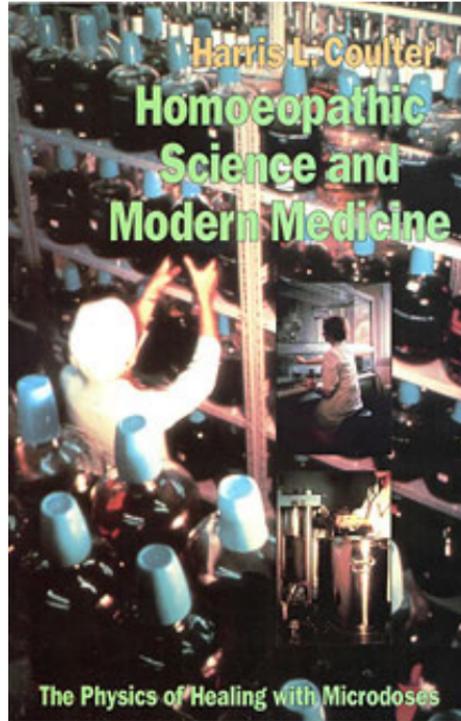
homoeopaths. Hence the power of the school was greater than its relatively small number of practitioners would indicate.

The AMA and its spokesmen viewed homoeopathy as a substantial threat to regular medicine all through the latter half of the nineteenth century. The existence of this threat spurred the production of a large body of polemical literature designed to prevent physicians from taking up this new doctrine and to win the homoeopathic patients back to medical orthodoxy.

The "medical education controversy" of the 1840's, which underlay the formation of the AMA, was actually a controversy over the cause of the defection of so many physicians to homoeopathy. The blame for this was ultimately laid at the door of American medical education.

The polemics continued until the end of the century and beyond, always stressing the homoeopath's alleged skill at ingratiating himself with his patients by his careful physical examination and his willingness to listen to a long recital of symptoms. Any cures were ascribed to the power of suggestion or to the natural recuperative potential of the organism. As the "regulars" gradually relinquished massive bloodletting and "heroic" **quantities** of medicines in the 1860 s and 1870's, they began to admit that the homoeopathic "placebos" may have had some justification two or three decades earlier but also made plain that patients now had no further reasons for adhering to this system. Those who persisted (and the numbers of homoeopathic physicians and patients increased steadily up into the early 1900's) were characterized in the same terms as before.

The verbal warfare against homoeopathy continued until well into the twentieth century, even though these physicians were officially admitted into the regular medical societies in 1903 (on the condition that they cease calling themselves "homoeopaths" and cease proselytizing for homoeopathy!!), and the only reason it died down in the 1930's and 1940's was that the few homoeopaths remaining in practice in this country were too small a target to be worth the trouble.



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174 Seiten, kart.
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