

## **Allopathy—a term that diminishes the profession**

**T**wo hundred years ago the practice of medicine was a field notable for its reliance on nostrums and procedures that ranged from those that were—at best—first aid, to some that were useless but comforting, to others that were outright deadly. What we currently know as modern medicine grew largely from the discoveries made since the scientific revolution and the ongoing linkage of medical knowledge to rigorous research methods. The coupling of expert knowledge to compassionate delivery of care—modern medicine—is often held out as one of the most tangible examples of human progress. It produced a dynamic, self-correcting system that evolves and makes use of new discoveries to deliver the best patient care possible.

But not everybody came along for the ride. The progress of scientific medicine continues in stark contrast with other sectarian, cultural, and overtly religious belief systems related to human health. These remained static and there is little to distinguish belief systems like naturopathy, homeopathy, chiropractic, traditional Chinese medicine, and so on today from the practices as they were originally constituted.

In the early 1800s a schism developed between medical practitioners who espoused the beliefs of Joseph Hahnemann, the inventor of homeopathy (where infinitely dilute preparations of noxious substances are purported to cure illness), and those who felt such ideas were inadequate. It was Hahnemann himself who coined the term *allopath*. The term was intended to indicate, in a pejorative way, that conventional practitioners of the early 19th century only treated disease by opposing symptoms and that they

offered nothing in terms of preventing illness or addressing the root causes of disease. The term *allopath* was rejected by mainstream medicine, but has continued to be used by homeopaths and other unconventional practitioners when referring to medical doctors.

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While physicians of the early 1800s had much less to offer patients than they do today, a knowledge of anatomy, the natural history of many diseases, and the early appreciation of the microbial causes of infectious diseases had begun to allow physicians to do far more than was captured by the derogatory term. Indeed, as time went on conventional medicine began to develop and deploy discoveries such as vaccines, insulin, new medicines and surgeries, cancer therapies, and public health campaigns that not only treated symptoms but effectively eliminated a large number of diseases and prevented many others.

It is all the more ironic, then, that the term *allopath* has become more commonly and effectively leveled by

adherents of complementary/alternative/integrative therapies at the medical profession. Perhaps unknowingly, some physicians apply the term to their own trade, not understanding that the term connotes a practitioner very different from themselves. The word is derived from the Greek *allos* (against) and *pathos* (suffering) and really denotes a process of diminishing symptoms. It is notable that while modern medicine has done more to understand, treat, cure, and prevent disease than any other entity in the history of humankind, practitioners who essentially do nothing but employ placebo effects to make patients believe they're getting somewhat better are the ones who somehow are not allopaths.

More interestingly, depicting scientific medicine as allopathic medicine is often used as a device to define debate at an administrative level when unconventional practitioners wish to position themselves as equal partners on the health care playing field. The BCMA has heard this from the mouths of government officials in the discussions around scope of practice, and it appears with some regularity in the submissions of unconventional practitioners to health ministries when extra status is being sought. When advocating for scarce government health dollars, it sounds so much better to offer naive administrators a choice between naturopathic, homeopathic, allopathic, Native healing, and Eastern medicine than it does to tell the truth: that you can choose between medicine that's consistent with the best information available, or things that aren't.

—Lloyd Oppel, MD  
Chair, Allied Health and  
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