April 2009.

The Editor,
The Veterinary Record,
7 Mansfield Street,
London, W1G 9NQ.

Dear Sir,

The study by Hill and others (VR, March 21, 2009, vol 164, pp 364-370) - incidentally, surely the first mainstream publication to report clairvoyance in a dog - provides extremely weak evidence to support the authors’ claim that homoeopathic treatment produced a “sustained, beneficial response” in dogs with atopic dermatitis.

The only prior prediction tested was the homoeopath’s expectation that 60-70% of dogs would respond in phase one. This demonstrably failed to occur, with only 25% meeting the criteria. It appears that introducing even limited objectivity into owner-reported outcomes reduces the response by about 60%. The authors believe the improvement shown by five dogs was more than coincidental, however without a control group this speculation is no better founded than the prediction of 60-70% response. Re-plotting their striking figure 1 to include all the subjects, not just the selected few, gives a far more realistic estimation of the prospects for an animal entering this study (Fig. 1).

Even though the owners of all three dogs in the second phase guessed which was the remedy, p is still very much greater than 0.05. That part of the study was hopelessly underpowered to test any effect, and arguably should have been omitted. We might compare Scott (2003) in which 5 dogs similarly treated with individualised homoeopathy for atopic dermatitis did not respond, but this was reported in a letter to the editor due to the small sample size.

Despite the weakness of the data, the optimistic rhetoric of this lengthy article in a respected journal provides powerful ammunition for homoeopathy proponents. The press release has already been issued, describing the five dogs as “responding well” (Anon, 2009). Regardless of subsequent criticism, the paper itself remains, to feature in future homoeopathic reference lists.

This is a perennial problem in the homoeopathic literature; one which, sadly, Hill and others exemplify. They refer to a trial at Cornell University of “over-the-counter” homoeopathy which reported no effect (Scott and others, 2002), but noted that this attracted criticism from homoeopaths who rejected non-individualised prescribing. Hill and others failed, however, to note one letter which praised the trial (Milstein, 2003), or the two letters from the original authors which addressed much of the criticism and presented further data regarding individualised treatment (Scott and Miller, 2002; Scott, 2003). The impression given by Hill and others was that this trial had been refuted, but this is by no means the case; on the contrary the follow-up data are highly relevant to the present study.
In contrast, at least two papers cited in support of the current study have indeed been refuted, but these refutations were not mentioned. Linde and others (1997) contains perhaps the most positive assessment of homoeopathy ever published in the mainstream literature. However, less often cited is the subsequent paper from the same authors which re-analysed their original data and came to much less encouraging conclusions (Linde and others, 1999).

The work of Rao and others (2007) was cited as demonstrating differences between remedies and potencies using spectroscopic analysis, “even though all should contain nothing but water”. This is incorrect. Rao and others were working with 95% ethanol, not water, and had not ensured that all material analysed was sourced from the same stock bottle. The differences presented, which were not supported by statistical analysis, were entirely consistent with purity variations in the source material. This was pointed out by Kerr and others (2008), and the criticism was accepted (Rao 2008). Nevertheless, we are still unclear as to how the memory of either water or ethanol is relevant to a trial where the substance administered to the patients was dry lactose.

Punctilious and even-handed evaluation of the existing literature is important in a scientific paper, and cherry-picking references no more legitimate than cherry-picking data.

Yours faithfully,

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References


![Figure 1: Pruritus scores of all dogs participating in the trial reported by Hill and others](image-url)