

SAMUEL HAHNEMANN & PARACELSUS

Samuel Hahnemann denied any link whatsoever to Paracelsus and any link to medieval alchemy as sources of his ideas or techniques. This article examines a range of evidence which suggests otherwise.

PARACELSUS

Some people say that Paracelsus had done much the same thing as Hahnemann some 250 years previously. This is a claim we need to look at more carefully. It is not quite true that Paracelsus had done the same thing. Paracelsus had certainly criticized allopathy both at a theoretical level and as a method, and he adopted and stressed a range of unorthodox ideas (e.g. law of similars), but unlike Hahnemann appears to have done all that emotionally, irrationally, chaotically and unsystematically-which was his way. A way that was peculiar to him and valid for him- and a way that is still valid for some. But he failed to articulate any clear, rationally or well-reasoned alternative to allopathy. Much of what he wrote is very obscure and contradictory and can in no way be regarded as a tidy medical system with a consistent and rational philosophy. Moreover, it is mostly understandable and of interest now in the light of Hahnemann and homoeopathy which came later. So it was not a clear system that predates homoeopathy as a well-argued and rational ideology. It was a mixed bag. If it had been a clear system it might well have been adopted more widely.

It might more realistically be seen as 'a preparation for Hahnemann', a clearing of debris, leveling of ground and the building of basic foundations for homoeopathy. But it never went any further than that. It was a foundation for a new house, that was never actually built. There were no walls no rooms and no roof. On a theoretical or ideological level it is perfectly true that

Paracelsus predates Hahnemann and forms a sound basis of ideas upon which Hahnemann built his 'house of homoeopathy,' but it is misleading to then say that Hahnemann copied Paracelsus or that he derived homoeopathy from Paracelsan medicine. In a sense he did do that. In another sense he just made parallel discoveries (mainly through direct insight and experiment) and built up a system with strong similarities to Paracelsus. His system was built up chiefly through experiment based upon some ideas from Cullen and Paracelsus, amongst others, and from his critique of allopathy. But it is oversimplistic and misleading to say that homoeopathy was first produced by Paracelsus and then perfected by Hahnemann.

I stress this point at some length because it has been an oft-repeated claim, even in his lifetime, that Hahnemann was a copier and imitator of Paracelsus—a charge he vigorously denied. If it was true he might have admitted it. That he denied it repeatedly indicates that it was probably more of a coincidence. That he became angry at these accusations does show that he may have been denying something. Of course, to those who swim in the wider river of history of ideas it is difficult to deny some link between Paracelsus and Hahnemann—they are profoundly in depth, but that does not inevitably mean that there is a strong causal link between them.

HAHNEMANN

Homoeopathy has a range of clearly traceable origins, but chiefly began as a reaction against the Heroic over drugging, bleeding and cupping of 18th century medicine. The reaction was chiefly against the inefficacy and the barbarity of those methods per se. The medical approach of homoeopathy can be traced back to some of the theoretical ideas of medieval alchemists like Albertus Magnus[1193-1280], Agrippa von Nettsheim[1486-1535], and especially Theophrastus Paracelsus[1493-1541]. It also contains elements from the early Greeks, especially Hippocrates[468-377BC] and also Thomas Sydenham [1624-1689]. Yet it is not until the work of hahnemann that all these separate threads were combined to form the homoeopathic system of medicine as we know it. As the name implies, its key feature is the use of the

similars principle [similia similibus curentur] rather than the use of opposites [contraria contraries] in disease.

“ A pattern emerges of ideas, influences, cultural realities and historical momentum behind his discoveries..”
[Danciger, 1987, p.1]

The question has often been asked did Hahnemann copy Paracelsus? The answer is ‘No’ in the sense that he used the law of similars and knew that others in medicine [including Paracelsus] before him had also used it. The answer is ‘no’ in the sense that what Paracelsus used was not homoeopathy in the Hahnemannian sense, because Paracelsus did not conduct provings and nor did he, as far as we know, attenuate the dose. These latter two techniques were developed exclusively by Hahnemann and form unique components of the homoeopathic system which he created. However, Paracelsus did, apparently, do something with dosage and did use small doses compared with his medical peers. Like Hahnemann, he also detested complex mixtures of drugs and tended to use a smaller compass of drugs than most of his peers. He also relied heavily on the healing power of nature to take up the work once his dose was exhausted:

‘I write short prescriptions, not forty to sixty ingredients. I prescribe little and seldom...’ [Paracelsus, *Sieben Defensiones*, in Coulter, Vol.1, p.348]

Paracelsus can thus be regarded as Hahnemann’s most ‘homoeopathic’ predecessor, as he is the most famous physician before Hahnemann to make extensive clinical use of the law of similars.

“Paracelsus felt that diseases should be classified as diseases of lead, silver, gold, Saturn, moon, sun or some other substance according to the cosmic patterns that correspond to and activate them.” [Whitmont, 1980, p. 10]

As far as we know Paracelsus did not conduct provings of drugs in the hahnemannian sense, but he was very interested in their poisonous effects, and he seemed to perceive the same link that Hahnemann made, between the toxicity and the therapeutic action of a drug. Paracelsus did, however, do something unusual with remedy preparation. Perhaps he glimpsed but dimly the underlying principle which Hahnemann was later able to clarify in much greater details. Yet even Paracelsus used contraries and was not reliable or consistent in his approach.

[Paracelsus's].. next step would have been to administer metals and minerals in a systematic way to healthy persons [as had been suggested by Galen]. This step was in fact taken by Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homoeopathic medicine, possibly through inspiration from Paracelsus.' [Coulter, Vol. 1, p. 442]

Hahnemann undoubtedly knew of and built upon the work of Paracelsus. But it is the size and extent of his debt that is difficult to quantify. Some [e.g. Danciger, 1987 Gutman 1978] have suggested that Hahnemann's debt to Paracelsus was great, that he was a member of western Esoteric traditions and that he was very familiar with the metaphysical views of his near-contemporary, Goethe [1749-1832], Western Esoteric traditions like the Freemasons, knight's Templar and the Rosicrucians. This may be stretching the point somewhat, as Hahnemann himself goes no further than mentioning Hippocrates as using the law of similars. Similar points are made by Neagu [1995] and Bradford [1895]

It is peculiar that Hahnemann never mentions that medical rebel and doyen of similars, Paracelsus. Perhaps he felt that Paracelsus was too controversial a figure to be linked with his new therapy. He was also complex and contradictory. He may have felt that accusations of plagiarism would have been made against him. It is well known that Hahnemann was a lifelong Freemason, and perhaps he was under a vow Esotericists on his new system of therapy.

It is very difficult to know with certainty to what degree Hahnemann leaned upon Paracelsus. He left behind little evidence of any substantial interest in occultism or mediaeval medicine, so it is more likely that he devised homoeopathy partly through practice and partly through his own mind just thinking things through. And for that there is abundant evidence right through his life –he had a brilliant, searching and restless inventiveness to his mentality. He was very perceptive and very original in almost everything he did.

Perhaps Hahnemann discovered similar ideas to Paracelsus but entirely via a different route, through his own experimentation and research and thus wished to stress the originality of his own work. This important aspect of influences upon the early Hahnemann, is discussed in depth in Haehl, 1922. [Vol. 1, p.11&pp.21-24, &Vol. 2, pp. 9-10] in which he specifically rejects any link with Paracelsus. Yet this remains a somewhat unconvincing viewpoint.

Hahnemann's link with Paracelsus was again emphasized in a paper given at the recent Stuttgart Conference on the History of Medicine [April 1995] by Dr. Michael Neagu, about the history of homoeopathy in his native Rumania [Geschichteder homoeopathie in Rumanien]. The post that Hahnemann took in Transylvania at the beginning of his career [1777-79], as a cataloguist to the medical library of a patron, Baron Samuel von Brukenthal, at Sibiu is crucial, because that library in which he spent two years, contained one of the largest European collections of original works by mediaeval alchemists and physicians, including a large collection of works by Paracelsus. It also contained the esoteric *Medicina Spagyrica Tripartita* [1648] of Jean Pharamond Rhumelius [c.1600-c.1660], which Neagu describes as 'a fundamental esoteric work, relying on the principle of *similia similibus curentur.*' [p.25 of his paper; p.259 in Dinges, 1996].

The story goes that Hahnemann could not fail to have been inspired by the contents of that collection and probably picked up

some therapeutic ideas while there, if only unconsciously. Neagu goes on to add that one of Hahnemann's direct disciples, Honigberger, 'was a speaker of the Rumanian language and had practiced homoeopathy in all three Romanian principates.' [p.25]. Nevertheless, we might say, this still does not prove that Hahnemann read these works, had any interest in them or obtained ideas from them. But it does not indeed seem highly likely that here we find a strong influence which had previously been dismissed or even underplayed, and one of profound importance to Hahnemann's later development.

As Close [1924,p.215] suggested:

"Many before Hahnemann, from Hippocrates down, had glimpses of the law [of similars], and some had tried to make use of it therapeutically; but all had failed because of their inability to properly graduate and adapt the dose."

"Paracelsus was also a firm believer in the doctrine of signatures, and in illustration of it explained every single part of St.John's Wort [*Hypericum perforatum*] in terms of this belief" .. the holes in the leaves mean that this herb helps all inner and outer orifices of the skin.. the blooms rot in the form of blood, a sign that it is good for wounds and should be used where flesh has to be treated." [Griggs, 1981, p.50]

Leaning heavily, as some might suggest, upon the pioneering work of Paracelsus, he proved and introduced many minerals, metals and acids into the material medica such as Silica, *Calcarea carbonica*, Sulphur, *Acidum Nitricum*, Aurum, Cuprum and Argentum, Kali bichromicum, etc. These substances were generally regarded as medicinally inert before the provings of Hahnemann. He also greatly improved the medical knowledge and usefulness of several conventional drugs [through proving them] such as *Carbo vegetabilis*, Mercury, Arsenic and Sulphur.

...nobody is allowed to practice by Hahnemann's method.. but now Prince Schwarzenberg, very ill and probably incurable, has confidence

in this new Theophrastus Paracelsus and begs for leave of absence from the Emperor to seek a cure across the border.' [Letter from Goethe, quoted in Haehl, Vol. 1, p.113]

Both mercilessly derided their medical contemporaries, rejected the medicine in which they were trained, used small doses and emphasized the law of similars.

'..the heathen teachers and philosophers, who follow the subteleties and crafts of their own inventions and opinions. Such teachers are Aristotle, Hippocrates, Avicenna, Galen, and the rest, who based all their arts upon their own opinions. Even if, at any time, they learnt anything from Nature, they destroyed it again with their own fantasies, dreams, and inventions, before they came to the final issue. By means of these, then, and their followers, nothibg perfect can be discovered.' [Paracelsus, Concerning the Spirits of the Planets,p.4]

Both became deeply enchanted by chemical experiments. Both made extensive use of poisons, minerals, acids and metals. Both also obtained brief university teaching posts, but got sacked after abusing their position, 'indoctrinating' their students, castigating the medical system of the day and teaching heretical forms of medicine. How similar to each other can you get? And both were thoroughly castigated by their orthodox brethren. The following could just as easily have been said by hahnemann, and with equal truth;

'After leaving university he practiced medicine along traditional lines, but gave up in disgust after discovering that he was only harming his patients:

'I found that the medicine I had learned was faulty, and that those who written about it neither knew nor understood it. They all tried to teach what they did not know. They are vainglorious babblers in all their wealth and pomp...[Paracelsus in Das buch paragramum, quoted in coulter, Vol. 1, p.346]

Their biggest difference, perhaps, is that Hahnemann used purified drugs, while Paracelsus tended to use unrefined natural products. The point here, of course, is that Hahnemann was far more widely read than any other doctor of his day. He knew medical history intimately. Indeed, some of his works contain references in Greek, Latin and Arabic from authors before the Christian era [e.g. On the Helleborism of the ancients, Lesser writings, Jain edition, pp 569-617]. He translated medical works from English, French, Italian, and Latin. His linguistic skills were truly astonishing. Of course he knew about Paracelsus, but he chose to keep quiet. It cannot be a coincidence that he put people off the trail leading to Paracelsus by never even mentioning him. The two systems of therapy are unmistakably similar. It is amazing that he is never mentioned. Indeed, many of the metals, acids and minerals in use in 18th Century medicine, and later proved by Hahnemann, were actually introduced into medicine originally by Paracelsus, including Mercury, Arsenic, Sulphur, Tin Lead, Gold, Iron, Copper and Salt.

'Paracelsus..[introduced].. a number of minerals remedies..iron, saltpeter, ammonia of sulphur [liver of sulphur], bicarbonate of soda, sulphuric acid, and red and black pulvis solaris [mercurial and antimonial compounds]..[and] he appears to have added several new ones: flower of sulphur, calomel, blue vitriol, and other zinc, copper, arsenic and lead compounds..' [Coulter, Vol.1, p.350]

Nor can it be a coincidence that Hahnemann proved and installed in his *Material Medica* the seven metals of ancient alchemy: Aurum, Argentum, Cuprum, Hydragyrum, Ferrum, Stannum and Plumbum. These seven metals form the absolute core of alchemical theory and practice [see Pelikan]. And in recent years Sol, Luna and Venus have also been proved and brought into use by alchemy-inspired homeopaths