

There's something about Mary

Interview with Mary Ellis

by Jo Kettelman MARH



Originally a registered nurse and midwife, I worked in a natural childbirth unit where I witnessed homeopaths assisting pregnant women and babies. I was so impressed that I decided to train as a homeopath myself. Since qualifying in 1999 I have built a thriving practice in Chesham, Bucks, and was a founding member of Laceys Yard, a multi-disciplinary therapy centre. I am passionate about homeopathy and love to share knowledge, so for the last 10 years I have regularly lectured for various homeopathic colleges. I also run a post-grad support group and a teaching clinic. I am lucky enough to be part of the editorial team for *Homeopathy in Practice* with the specific responsibility of organising the book reviews.

Over the past 10 years or so, being a homeopath has been difficult. There are the almost daily attacks in the media, the threatening behaviour of the sceptics on Twitter and the bullish attitude of the ASA. This state of affairs has led to many homeopaths leaving the profession, colleges closing and student numbers dwindling. Yet in the current dismal climate there is a light shining brightly in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. The Southern College of Homeopathy is a place that Jerome Whitney has described as a venue where the vital force is flowing. So how is the Southern College bucking the trend? I went to interview Mary Ellis, the college principal – and my boss when I lecture for her – to find out more.



Mary Ellis

Jo Kettelman: *Start by telling us how you got into homeopathy?*

Mary Ellis: I got into homeopathy via my children. I'd just had Joshua and I was working part-time for a chiropractor. This clinic also employed a homeopath. Sam, my eldest son, was three and he had had a cough at night since he was six months old which the doctor said was asthma; he was prescribed Ventolin syrup which I didn't want to give to him but I didn't know why. So I chatted to the homeopath and asked if there was anything she could offer. She gave me two pills and the cough stopped; it was miraculous! I had been wondering whether to have my second son vaccinated – I didn't want to vaccinate Josh and I wasn't sure why – so, after discussing his health with

the homeopath, I decided to go the homeopathic route with both my children. I could see their health improve and I was fascinated. Like most mothers, once I saw how it was helping my kids, I thought I would try some myself.

I had polycystic ovary syndrome which was why I'd had to undergo IVF to have my children so I said, 'can you treat that?' I saw her for three years and I haven't got any of those issues now. That was it, I was hooked! I started reading everything I could lay my hands on about homeopathy, getting more and more interested, playing around with it, and giving out remedies to friends and work colleagues. I was working in recruitment then, with a team that liked to party hard, so I became very adroit ▸



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▷ at handing out *Nux vomica*, but I also offered remedies for common ailments like coughs and colds.

JK: *Did you do a first aid course or did you just pick up that knowledge?*

ME: I didn't do a homeopathic first aid course; I just read and played with the remedies, and picked the brains of my homeopath. She told me she had been a cleaner before training to be a homeopath; I found that inspirational and decided to train myself. But it took ages to start a course because life got in the way for a while. I got divorced, was a single parent, and then I started my own recruitment business. But I wasn't deterred, and the moment I had a breathing space I thought, 'right, now I'll train as a homeopath' ... which was a bit ludicrous! I was so impulsive once I'd made the decision, I literally phoned up the College of Practical Homeopathy that week and said 'I'm thinking of training as a homeopath', to which

they replied, 'the course starts on Saturday'. I went along, met Robert Davidson and I joined.

On the first day, I remember sitting there and thinking, 'I want a college of my own'. It was just the best thing ever. But after two years I was beginning to struggle a bit with all my commitments; it was getting too manic – driving to North London, getting the kids looked after, running my business. So, I stopped and had a two-year break to gather myself and restore my energy. I returned to my training at a college much nearer to where I was living, run by Sue Josling. It was the South East College of Homeopathy, but it's not there anymore. As Sue had been vice principal at CPH she knew me and it was a perfect fit.

JK: *When you had your two-year break were you still playing with the remedies, still treating people?*

ME: Yes, I continued to treat my family and friends and increase my knowledge base via books,

Mary didn't want to give her son cough syrup for his cough

but I was quite isolated from the homeopathic connections I had made in North London and missed that support. I was so bored with recruitment; the business was doing alright but my heart just wasn't in it; I knew I wanted to be a homeopath, so I think the two-year break was actually good for me as it made my desire for homeopathy stronger. The moment I qualified I closed the recruitment business and that was it, I was a homeopath!

JK: *And you were a full-time homeopath from then?*

ME: Yes.

JK: *Where did you work and how did your practice grow?*

ME: I worked from home. I was living in Mayfield, East Sussex, and I still had the patients I had as a student. I put up a flyer in the organic farm shop and, as it was a tiny village, I just got chatting to everyone locally. I got patients that way; first the florist and then the butcher and



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then they all recommended me to their customers and it just grew. I also rented a small room in another village but that was never as busy as working from home. Then life reared its head again and I moved to Coulsdon, Surrey, so I had to start all over again! I made connections with other alternative practitioners and hired rooms. I went to a local osteopath, chatted to him and started working from his practice and a friend recommended a chiropractor in Bromley whose practice I also joined, and, all these years later, I'm still working there.

JK: *Did you find it hard to build up a practice?*

ME: No.

JK: *Generally, people say that when they graduate it's really hard to get clients and, statistically, we know the numbers of practitioners are decreasing. What do you think was the difference for you?*

ME: I talked! I did a lot of talks to mother and baby groups and I had

lots of friends who said, can you do a talk on this, or could you come into my mother and baby group. I just talked. I talked to people everywhere I went. I was also lucky as both the osteopath and the chiropractor referred clients to me. But, generally, I think it's talking that makes the difference. I have never advertised, ever. I don't think that works. I did a website and put myself on all the CAM free local pages. And, obviously, after I joined ARH, I was on their website,

Mary has strong personal ties with Iceland

The old phrase, 'there is no such thing as bad publicity', is true

and I've had a lot of referrals from there. I was with the SoH for a while but ARH was a much better match for me – more dynamic and in sync with my thinking.

JK: *So, there you are, building your practice and doing well, and then you decide to open a college. That's a massive leap. How did that happen?*

ME: I was asked to do some marketing for the South East College of Homeopathy, but then they cancelled me because the college was about to close. I thought, 'what a shame I don't have any money as I would like to buy it'. But a seed was sown. I kept thinking, 'why not open a college? Why not?' I had run my own recruiting business, which I had started with the same idea of 'why not?'. I had six clients who had all expressed an interest in training as a homeopath, found premises that I could hire, and just started. As simple as that! I learnt as I went on, and things

▷ evolved and changed. Initially I had a partner but, as our ideas evolved differently, we branched into separate colleges; but the ‘keep it simple’ mantra is still at the heart of the college.

JK: *What’s it like, being head of a college?*

ME: Great! I find it inspirational. It feeds my passion working with the students. I adore them and their thirst for knowledge and it reminds me how I felt when I embarked on this journey. It’s made me a better homeopath. I learn from them and I am constantly revising remedies and methods to teach them. I’m honing my craft. I’m sure it’s made my thirst for knowledge stronger than it would have been if I hadn’t become a teacher. I just love watching the journey as the students evolve from excited first years, through the confusion of

the second year, to emerging in the third year with a solid grounding in the basics of homeopathy. They just suddenly get it. I love that! I love working with other homeopaths. I’ve also loved how some of the graduates have stayed on and started working with the college in various roles; student mentors as well as teachers. And this is an evolving process; as their individual practices get too busy, someone else graduates to take on this role. It’s wonderful to have that progression of students coming through the system and then wanting to give something back by mentoring.

JK: *So, Mary, how is Southern College bucking the trend of declining student numbers? What is its unique selling point? What makes it so vibrant?*

ME: That’s a tricky question but I think it boils down to the fact

that I’m not listening to the general level of negativity that circulates in the profession. Every time there is a bashing of homeopathy in the media my personal practice gets busier. The old phrase, ‘there is no such thing as bad publicity’, is true. The mention of homeopathy seems to make people curious. They want to know about this other form of medicine that is mentioned in the news. On the whole, people are fed up with doctors, waiting times and medication, and when someone mentions homeopathy they think they will check it out. Actually, it’s great for us; I have never been busier. Also, I think I’m a pretty enthusiastic person so I guess my enthusiasm encourages others to give homeopathy a go ... and I do not allow any negativity to come into the classroom. I tell the students *now* is the best time to train as a homeopath; people are searching for something to help them, the NHS is falling apart in front of our eyes, sadly, and someone has to be there to help all these people.

Also, the profession as a whole is stepping up. We have 4H (4 Homeopathy), HAT (Homeopathy Action Trust), and ARH, all working together at pushing homeopathy into the public domain. We have had years of being devalued and distracted by organisations like the ASA, but now we are beginning to emerge, not playing their game but working towards our own goals. No more cowering in the corner, although I’ve never been part of that; things are just going to get better and better for homeopathy. So, back to your question ... it’s just that we don’t engender fear. I will not allow fear-based teaching in the college.

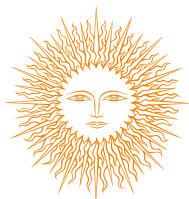
JK: *Who are your students, how do you select them?*

ME: They must have passion, that’s the main thing. They need a willingness to learn. I don’t mind what background they come from. The college will help people find their learning style; we have some students



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with dyslexia and we are trying to accommodate that. The college is not exam-oriented but it is hot on cases and practitioner skills. I want people who are interested in health – their own, and the health of the population. I want competent practitioners at the end of the course. I'm not concerned about how many essays you can write. I want practitioners that are passionate about homeopathy and the homeopathic profession. I haven't had anyone come through the college who hasn't had the aim of working as a homeopath; nobody has left saying they just want it as a hobby. The course focuses on practitioner skills and we offer an optional fourth year where we focus fully on practitioner development. We also encourage them to start taking cases from the first year, building their confidence with supervision; and we build on that throughout the course so that by the time they leave they should have enough student cases to start a practice. I think our students are lucky because we have a broad teaching base and so they are exposed to lots of different professionals with different styles; so when they leave they aren't clones of me or any other

tutor but they are themselves with their own unique style.

JK: *You mentioned HAT earlier, Mary; you are now working with HAT. You are a prime example of the phrase, 'if you want something done, ask a busy person!' You work with Homeopaths Support Refugees ... and with HAT... and run a college. How do you fit all that in and still have time for your own practice?*

Mary's charity intends to start working with homeless people

The support network is vital. If it fails it's due to me, but if it succeeds it's due to everyone else

ME: Well I've only recently joined HAT so I'm still juggling that one. The support for the refugees started in January 2016. I knew that some homeopaths had already gone out to the camp at Calais and, as I was watching the news, I felt the horror of the situation and thought I have to do something. I went originally with four colleagues who felt like me; we didn't know what we were getting into and then the whole project just snowballed. Once you have been there and witness those scenes you can't forget them and just ignore the human tragedy. I felt driven to continue to help in some way.

So, as a group we decided to get organised and form the charity and fundraise to be able to develop the work of homeopaths within the refugee camps. It had a life of its own. We became a well-oiled machine; some people prepped remedies for us while others went to the camps. We ran a training session to let any volunteers know what they were letting themselves in for, and offered treatment to both refugees and volunteers in the UK. The need and the work was relentless but unsustainable at that level – at one point I was visiting the camps weekly; my private practice took a bit of a hit while I was so heavily involved in Calais but, as most of the visits were during the summer months, thankfully college was not adversely affected. Since the destruction of the camp at Calais I have had time for reflection and I feel that my time of going to France has, for the moment, ended. Others are still going to Dunkirk and Paris – which is great – and I'm still involved, but my role has changed from frontline.

As the charity is evolving, too, we are looking at branching out to working with the homeless and helping those long-term volunteers with post-traumatic stress. We gained lots of knowledge in those intense weeks and are now looking at ways to use our expertise. The peer support you get from colleagues in times of adversity is incredible and we have formed such a bond between us.

▷ I worked with some extraordinary homeopaths. But now it's time for me to devote more time to the colleges.

JK: *You mention colleges; tell our readers about that, as that really is bucking the trend!*

ME: Yes. I became aware that colleges in the North of England had closed and yet I had enquiries from potential students who live in the north. And if no-one is training, who is going to treat all the potential clients in these areas? So, after chatting and sharing ideas with good friends, I have decided to open a college. The Northern College of Homeopathy, based in Yorkshire, opens in September 2017 and we already have three people signed up to start the first year. It will be run by Sarah Johnson-Knight from her clinic initially and then, as it grows, we will move to bigger premises. It's really exciting. It will run along the same lines as the Southern College. Sarah will be vice principal and I will go up occasionally to support and help iron out any problems.

And then there is the Icelandic college. I have close personal ties to Iceland and have been visiting the country for over 40 years so, when the opportunity came up for organising a post-grad workshop, I jumped at the chance. We had a successful gathering of homeopaths but, during discussions with them, it became apparent that homeopathy is floundering a bit in Iceland. So, after discussions with a core group I have agreed to open a further college, the Icelandic College of Homeopathy, also due to start in September 2017.

JK: *As you talk about these colleges, Mary, it's almost as if you have a franchise of a college that you could take anywhere?*

ME: Yes, why not? It's not me running everything – that would be impossible – it's about creating a team of people who work well, following the formula that has been built up through our expertise and knowledge. We have a really good curriculum and process for running a successful college so there is no

reason why others can't use those guidelines to reach the same results. It doesn't have to be the same lecturers at each college, but whoever delivers the lecture must reach the required standard that we have set at the Southern College.

JK: *How will you ensure that the people who work for you meet that standard? How involved do you plan to be?*

ME: I plan to be very involved in the curriculum and I am planning to meet with every tutor in the UK – but what's important is to have a good team, people that I trust to fulfil the remit of the college. I have that with the people I have put in place in

That's all it takes, get the word out there. Now is our time

Iceland. The other thing I plan to do is have cross-college tutor meetings as well as ones based in their own area. As I said at the beginning of this interview, I think talking to people is crucial. With good communication, everything is possible. It's important. We have an accreditation with the Homeopathic Course Providers Forum and I do not wish to lose that. We must maintain standards for ourselves and our clients and profession. We need that high standard.

And fundamental to that is the use of delegation and team work. It would be impossible for me to do everything and still keep that high standard – I would drop some balls – but, if I get good people in place, I can then hold the eagle's view. The support network is vital. If it fails it's due to me, but if it succeeds it's due to everyone else. It just happens to be my name on the banner.

JK: *What is your vision for the future, Mary?*

ME: Well, if I'm honest, my vision is to have more colleges, possibly in other countries too. I love the idea of a franchise and lots of colleges. They don't all have to be mine; a variety of styles is really vital to the health of homeopathy. But my dream is to have homeopaths everywhere, like doctors, at least one in every town. I want there to be choice. I don't like the idea that some homeopaths seem to foster competition or fear of other therapists who might steal their clients. I want to live in a world where homeopaths work in group practices or in practices with other therapists, where it's normal to go and see your homeopath. I want to educate people about homeopathy, not just students but the general public too. We need regular homeopathic first aid courses; people need to be empowered to care for themselves and their families. The old paradigm of, 'I've got a cold so I'll go to my GP', is outdated and needs changing.

JK: *And when people say you can't make a career out of homeopathy?*

ME: Don't believe it! There are people out there waiting to see a homeopath. I have to refer some clients to a colleague as I'm too busy to see them. Just put the work in and talk to people. That's all it takes, get the word out there. Now is our time.

JK: *Anything else you want to add?*

ME: Yes, come and train with us!

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