

The freight train from China

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Less than four years ago, the Chinese Government launched their *One Belt, One Road* programme; an initiative aimed at reviving the ancient Silk Road trading route linking China to the West, replacing the horse / camel trains of an earlier age, with the 'iron horse' of our modern rail network. This project was not without its challenges; apart from the vast distances involved, these trains carrying goods from China to Europe have to pass through several countries from the former Soviet Union, which still use a larger rail gauge than most other European countries. This makes it necessary to transfer the freight containers onto different rolling stock at several stages of the journey, an obstacle which has been overcome by a combination of technological ingenuity and determination. The result is that, since 2013, over 40 freight train routes have been established linking China to 14 different European cities. Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of this whole project was when a freight train, which had left East China's Yiwu City in Zhejiang Province on New Year's Day, arrived in Barking (Essex) on 18 January 2017.

The freight train from China had taken just 18 days to travel over 7,400 miles, passing through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Belgium and France before entering the UK via the Channel Tunnel. Goods will now be carried to the UK via this route on a weekly basis, taking over 30 days less than maritime transportation, and costing 80% less than air freight. It is encouraging to note that China, a country which has some of the highest pollution levels in the world, has chosen to invest in developing such an ecologically sound transport network. The economic benefits to China are obvious, but we also stand to gain from this modern Silk Road. After all, trading is a two-way process, and every container which reaches Barking for unloading will make the return journey to China, potentially filled with goods made in the UK.

The opportunities provided by this new trading route will become even more important as the UK begins the process of leaving the European Union, because it provides us with a very physical link to our friends and neighbours in Europe and beyond. We may be a small island, but we are, and always have been, connected to the rest of the world in a multitude of different ways. This is not going to change as a result of last year's EU referendum, despite what some media 'experts' would have us believe. However, the onus is now placed squarely on each and every one of us, to seek to create new opportunities, and to reach out beyond our established comfort zone.

The *One Belt, One Road* project is a success story which started as an aspiration; to re-establish

an overland trading route from China to Europe. It demonstrates that, by focusing on the end goal, a solution will be found to even the most daunting of problems, an approach that we, the homeopathy profession, would benefit from adopting. We have spent years trying to convince the decision makers within healthcare delivery that homeopathy works, but our best efforts have met with limited success. This is partly because we have been sidetracked by the aggressive and well-coordinated anti-homeopathy war, waged upon us by just a small number of individuals. We have good reason to believe that these antis have a vested interest in suppressing positive information about homeopathy from entering the public domain, so why have we allowed them to twist and distort our own terms of reference? They have consistently argued that there is no robust scientific evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of homeopathy, so therefore it doesn't work and, surprisingly, we seem to have bought into this dogma. We have spent a huge amount of time and energy on trying to prove to the world that homeopathy can demonstrate efficacy according to the limited, and often highly subjective, constraints of a Randomised Control Trial (RCT). Why?

Some people still argue that homeopathy must be subjected to the same scrutiny as conventional medicine, or it will never be properly recognised and accepted by the establishment. The problem is that the conventional medical model focuses on disease management, not health enhancement, and the scrutiny which it receives is often highly subjective. It is becoming increasingly clear that numerous trials involving conventional medicine are flawed, sometimes through deliberately withholding negative information, and at other times because the trial was designed to achieve a particular result. Either way, a misleading conclusion relating to conventional medicine can have very serious short term and long term consequences. Unfortunately, many patients still believe that there is a quick fix solution to every condition, and that potentially debilitating side-effects of drugs, which may be worse than the original complaint, are the price you have to pay to get better.

Sickness has become a major industry, with pharmaceutical companies investing billions annually to develop new products to meet our apparently insatiable need to have a pill for every ill. It could be argued that our actual health has been compromised in order to ensure vast profits for the pharmaceutical industry. We have become overly dependent on a chemical solution for everything, and our dependence has heralded the development of a new, highly dangerous phenomena; anti-microbial resistance

(AMR). Common sense could have predicted that the overuse of antibiotics would eventually lead to a rise in AMR, but RCTs clearly did not. I believe that RCTs are of limited value, and their reliability, both in terms of efficacy and safety, is often dangerously overrated. Furthermore, RCTs rarely take into account the fact that people (patients) live in the real world, not the laboratory, and they have complex, diverse needs. One size does not fit all, and it never will. As homeopaths, we already know this. We do not need to continue to try to emulate an inadequate system. Now is the time to distance ourselves from the artificial, reductionist world of the RCT, and promote homeopathy for what it really is; a unique, gentle, yet powerful system of medicine.

If you want to know if homeopathy works, ask a patient. There is no need to just take the homeopath's word for it, because there are many millions of patients across the world, who have significantly benefited from homeopathy. Their medical records exist in hospitals in many different countries, and they provide an irrefutable account of homeopathy as an effective treatment option. Yes, I know the antis refer to real evidence of this kind as anecdotal, or a result of the placebo effect; however, we are talking about literally millions of carefully documented case studies here, so the antis' assertions are clearly nonsense. Patients are in the unique position of experiencing both the scope and effectiveness of homeopathic treatment at first hand and, as we are supposed to be working towards 'patient-centred' healthcare, it is about time that the patient's experience was taken seriously. **I would contend that only outcomes-based evidence provides us with reliable information. Outcomes-based evidence is a fusion of the patient's experience of a particular treatment, and the clinician's recorded observation.**

There are a number of outcomes-based trials which provide positive information relating to the efficacy of homeopathy, and their scope is broad-ranging. Here in the UK, the Spence *et al* Bristol Homeopathic Hospital Survey (2015) is one well-documented example. Another high profile study, this time considering homeopathy alongside other CAM therapies, was the year-long pilot study undertaken in Northern Ireland, starting in February 2007. Its primary purpose was to evaluate how CAM could be effectively utilised in collaboration with conventional interventions provided by the NHS. The full report, published in May 2008, provided very interesting results. It was generally agreed that the pilot was highly successful in achieving its goal; the integration of CAM modalities into the NHS, to the benefit of both patients and health care providers alike. Perhaps even more significantly, it also produced information which gave credence to the efficacy of CAM modalities per se, with homeopathy showing excellent results for the treatment of mental / emotional problems.

The outcomes-based trial which has impressed me the most was a cost evaluation of the treatment of respiratory disorders undertaken in the Campo di Marte Hospital, Tuscany, Italy, from 1998 – 2003. The cost of conventional drug treatment given to a group of patients suffering from asthma and recurring respiratory disorders was monitored for one year prior to the introduction of homeopathic treatment, then compared to the conventional drug costs incurred over a two-year period following the introduction of homeopathic treatment. The analysis showed a reduction in drug costs specific to respiratory disorders

of over 46%, and a reduction of general drug costs of over 42% in the patient group given homeopathy. Overall patient wellbeing also improved significantly; a fact which undoubtedly contributed to the reduction in general drug requirements. This work, overseen by Elio Rossi *et al*, is ongoing, and the results of more recent studies are now available. The reports reach the same, unequivocal conclusion: the health of patients improves following homeopathic treatment, and dependency on conventional (expensive, sometimes dangerous) drugs reduces significantly. **In other words, homeopathy works**, as millions of patients (and their clinicians) can testify. This begs an important question: given the severe financial constraints currently faced by the NHS, coupled with the additional burden placed on their already stretched resources by an increasingly ageing population, **how can the NHS afford *not* to fully utilise CAM provision in the services it offers?**

We spent £140 billion on disease management across the UK last year, yet we continue to fail to deliver meaningful patient-centred healthcare. Recent experience can confirm that this situation has become unsustainable; we need to acknowledge that the NHS is a broken system, and critically review and revise our whole approach to healthcare provision.

The good news is that we have just been given the chance to inform a small group of MPs about how CAM can play a valuable role in improving the health and wellbeing of patients. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Integrated Healthcare (PGIH) has just launched a consultation on integrated healthcare in the UK. This consultation will look at all aspects of complementary, alternative and integrated healthcare in order to produce a report which will be presented to Government and others. The report will be used to help guide the future work of the PGIH, and to inform the decision makers within healthcare delivery.

The consultation is open to all interested parties, so please take this opportunity to tell the PGIH that homeopathy works. You can contact the ARH office on info@a-r-h.org for a questionnaire, and the closing date for submissions is 31 March 2017.

We will be able to use the PGIH report to inform and influence our MPs and other decision makers, to work towards developing a healthcare system fit for purpose, where the patient is genuinely regarded as a unique individual with specific needs. However, in order to achieve change, we have to demand change, and this will require organised lobbying by both practitioners and patients. Our message is simple; we need homeopathy for patients. Homeopathy works, patients get better following homeopathic treatment, homeopathy is cost efficient, patients have the right to choose their treatment option, so homeopathy should be readily available for everyone.

Various circumstances have combined (the PGIH consultation, Brexit, our struggling NHS etc) to make this the right time to promote positive information about homeopathy to everyone. The barriers we face include vested interests, reluctance to move beyond long-established comfort zones, apathy, and ignorance. Our first task must be to inform and educate the public and the policy makers. It will be a considerable undertaking but, as long as we remain focussed on our end goal, **to establish homeopathy as an internationally recognised and accepted healthcare modality**, we will overcome the obstacles which present themselves. We can and will do this together. □