PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF VIRAL INFECTION: HOMEOPATHIC APPROACH

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In the past few decades, India has witnessed a marked increase in the incidence and prevalence of viral infections.1,2,3,4,5 Some of these infections have raised much concern because of their severity, extent of spread, and burden on health services. Although antiviral drugs have been developed for use as prophylactics and therapeutic agents, they have some disadvantages, such as adverse effects and the development of resistance.6 Further, the large demand for these drugs during epidemics places a huge strain on national health resources.

In general, viral infections pose several problems to their treatment. These issues can be mainly attributed to certain properties of viruses themselves. Viruses are capable of developing alternative means of survival in the face of antibodies, immune cells, chemotherapeutic agents, or other hostile elements; their survival is achieved by mutations, recombination, and changes in biochemical pathways.7

Under these circumstances, there has been growing interest in the use of alternative therapies in the management of viral infections. Homeopathy has attracted considerable attention during the last few years, with a large number of patients receiving and seeking homeopathic treatment for both the management and prevention of diseases.

Homeopathy is a field of therapeutics based on the principle of ‘like cures like’. The symptoms of a patient are treated by administering a
homeopathic medicine that is capable of producing similar symptoms in a healthy individual. The medicines are prepared from plant, animal, and mineral substances by a process known as potentization, wherein the medicinal agent is subjected to serial dilutions in a carrier along with periodic agitation. The medicines are believed to enhance the immune response of the individual, enabling him/her to combat the disease and restore normal health.

For a homeopath, the most important aspect of approaching a case is thorough case taking; sometimes seemingly insignificant details may help the homeopath select the most suitable remedy. The choice of the remedy is mainly based on the symptom totality, which encompasses the physical and mental makeup of the patient. Often, 2 patients at the same stage of a clinical condition, say upper respiratory tract infection, may receive 2 separate medicines because of differences in the symptoms that are peculiar and unrelated to the condition per se. Thus, the treatment administered is tailor-made for the patient, i.e., individualized.

Since the choice of the homeopathic remedy for a given case is based mainly on the clinical presentation, i.e., the signs and symptoms, the isolation of the physical ‘causative’ agent, e.g., the bacterial or viral infectious agent is not mandatory for definitive treatment. Therefore, homoeopathic medicines can be employed even in cases of infection where the pathogenic organism cannot be readily identified or isolated. This makes the system ideal for the treatment of new and emerging infectious diseases, which are currently a major public health concern. The management of such diseases may be improved by the combined use of homeopathy and effective public health measures. This combined
approach needs to be tested in clinical trials to determine its practical value.

The fundamental principles of homeopathic prescription also make the system greatly valuable in epidemic settings. Since during an epidemic, the affected population essentially presents with a similar set of symptoms, the homeopathic remedy is selected by compiling these symptoms. The remedy selected on the basis of this profile is called the genus epidemicus, and it can be applied routinely in the treatment of most of the affected patients. When appropriate, such a remedy can also serve as a prophylactic. A study conducted in Kerala revealed that homeopathic medicines were effective in preventing Chikungunya fever in an exposed population. Similarly, another recent report indicated that the homeopathic medicine Influenzinum plays an important role in the prevention and cure of the influenza, while another drug, Oscillococcinum, is useful for relieving the symptoms caused by this disease.

Besides managing the acute infections, carefully selected homeopathic medicines are also capable of correcting the tendency for recurrent viral infections. The results of a large, prospective, multicenter cohort study examining the long-term benefits of homeopathic treatment in reducing disease severity and improving the patients’ quality of life have been encouraging.

Further, studies conducted in some countries have shown that the homeopathic management of patients is cost-effective and patient-friendly. This implies that given the opportunity, homeopathy can
greatly reduce the burden on public health services; this would be particularly beneficial for a developing country like ours.

Homeopathy has been and is, to some extent, a frequent target of skepticism because of the supposed lack of sufficient evidence validating its fundamental tenets and clinical efficiency. Research on this relatively new field of medicine is still in its infancy and warrants a sea change to establish beyond doubt the credibility of this therapeutic system. In the past, studies on this system have been deemed to be of poor quality because of the conflicts between the basic theories of homeopathy and the standard principles of scientific research. Nevertheless, recent publications reporting the results of several randomized controlled trials and studies on the value of homeopathy for various conditions have increasingly provided evidences in favor of homeopathy. An important oft-debated aspect of homeopathy is the mechanism of action of homeopathic medicines, which is often raised questioned because of the high dilutions at which the medicines are prepared. However, basic science studies have shown that very high dilutions of substance do, in fact, retain the properties of the original substance and that such dilutions have certain biological effects on cells. Further investigations on these lines are expected to conclusively establish the effectiveness of homeopathic medicines at a physiological level.

All in all, homeopathy has great potential as a therapeutic system that stands at par with conventional medicine. With evidence to the effectiveness of homeopathy mounting, this stream of therapeutics can be expected to gain widespread acceptance both nationally and internationally and establish its supremacy, at least in certain therapeutic areas.
References


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