

DIALOGUE

NHS Letter Stimulates International Dialogue on Interpretation and Possible Implications of CAM Research

VINJAR FØNNEBØ, M.D., Ph.D.,¹ and MICHAEL BAUM, M.B., Ch.M., F.R.C.S., M.D.(Hon)²

ABSTRACT

Prompted by the open letter by 13 prominent British scientists to National Health Science (NHS) trusts questioning the use of homeopathy, Vinjar Fønnebø, M.D., Ph.D., and Michael Baum, M.B., Ch.M., F.R.C.S., M.D.(Hon) entered into an e-mail exchange about the issues of research and documentation of practices in “complementary,” “alternative,” and “integrated” medicine. The paper presents the whole exchange unedited. Researchers who are well-acquainted with the field benefit from discussing and challenging, and will achieve a clearer understanding of both the understanding and opinions of the others as well as their own positions.

INTRODUCTION

As a reaction to the growing popularity of homeopathy within the United Kingdom and the expensive refurbishment of the Royal London Homeopathic hospital a group of 13 prominent scientists in the United Kingdom led by Michael Baum wrote to each National Health Service (NHS) purchasing trust in the United Kingdom to inquire about the provision of homeopathy. This letter was leaked to *The Times* and appeared as a front-page story. They opened the letter by stating:

We are a group of physicians and scientists who are concerned about ways in which unproven or disproved treatments are being encouraged for general use in the NHS. We would ask you to review practices in your own trust, and to join us in representing our concerns to the Department of Health because we want patients to benefit from the best treatments available.

These two statements are representative of a debate that has been going on for decades about the level of documentation of therapies used in medicine as well as approaches to treatment outside of conventional medicine.

The authors of this paper cochaired the course “Controversies about CAM in Oncology” arranged by the European School of Oncology in Brussels, Belgium, in February 2006. At that meeting, we exchanged views on research challenges in CAM, and developed a mutual respect for possibly differing views.

When V.F. read the letter authored by Michael Baum and his colleagues, he expressed an interest in entering into a broader dialogue with the group on research and documentation issues with regard to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). We would like to make the e-mail dialogue that followed between the two of us on this matter publicly accessible. The e-mail dialogue here presented is exactly what was being written. No edits have been performed.

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**E-MAIL DIALOGUE BETWEEN VINJAR
FØNNEBØ AND MICHAEL BAUM**

From: Vinjar Fønnebø
Date: 05/25/06 01:59:49
To: Michael
Subject: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Michael,

I have read with interest the letter you and several other doctors have sent to the NHS trusts concerning provision of alternative medicine.

With regard to our discussions in Brussels in February, I would have been interested to discuss some of the aspects of CAM with this group. Does this group ever meet in person?

Vinjar

Fra: Michael
Sendt: Thursday, May 25, 2006 16:55
Til: Vinjar Fønnebø
Emne: Re: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Vinjar,
 Good to hear from you.
 We are an informal group who have worked together as a virtual community. We have a core group who met once for tea at the RSM. What do you have in mind?
 Mike

From: Vinjar Fønnebø
Date: 05/26/06 13:16:47
To: Michael
Subject: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Michael,

If you remember the research strategy I presented in Brussels, I think it is important to be scientifically very clear about how the results from previous research into CAM treatment modalities can be interpreted with regard to clinical implication.

It would have been very interesting to discuss these issues with your informal group, maybe over tea some time at the RSM?

Vinjar

From: Michael
Sent: 27. mai 2006 17:43
To: Vinjar Fønnebø
Subject: Re: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

That'll be very difficult to arrange. Let's start the discussion by e mail.

Mike
From: Vinjar Fønnebø
Date: 06/06/06 13:41:28
To: Michael
Subject: RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Michael,

I have been travelling for a while, but have now come home again. OK, I will share some of my thoughts about this letter with you.

The well-established phase I-III model of drug research has proven very successful in ensuring that only safe and efficacious drugs are found in the shelves of drug stores. The Health Technology Assessment system is an equally important approach to non-pharmacological treatments. The results of this research should to a large degree determine which tools the individual doctor uses as part of his or her practice of medicine.

Because international research so far on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has been done to a large degree by trying to mimic the pharmacological research model, similar consequences should take place with regard to these treatments.

I understand that that is the intent of the letter you have written together with some colleagues. It seems as though your group has not limited itself to what the CAM research results really show, but you have drawn unwarranted and unscientific conclusions about CAM as a whole. Let me explain my line of thinking. Since the letter used homeopathy as an example, I can also use it as an example:

The research on homeopathic remedies, using the RCT design with double-blinding, has so far, with few exceptions, shown that the homeopathic remedies do not "work". Doctors should therefore not prescribe them instead of, or in addition to, pharmaceutical drugs. This is a sound scientific interpretation of the research. In your letter, however, you and your colleagues state:

"First, there is now overt promotion of homeopathy in parts of the NHS (including the NHS Direct website). It is an implausible treatment for which over a dozen systematic reviews have failed to produce convincing evidence of effectiveness. Despite this, a recently-published patient guide, promoting use of homeopathy without making the lack of proven efficacy clear to patients, is being made available through government funding. Further suggestions about ben-

efits of homeopathy in the treatment of asthma have been made in the ‘Smallwood Report’ and in another publication by the Department of Health designed to give primary care groups “a basic source of reference on complementary and alternative therapies.” A Cochrane review of all relevant studies, however, failed to confirm any benefits for asthma treatment.”

In this paragraph you make statements about homeopathy as such on the basis of studies on homeopathic remedies. The research on homeopathy as a system however is almost nonexistent, and the research on the remedies in isolation can of course say very little about the effectiveness of homeopathy as a system approach.

In the rest of the letter you seem to continue to mix these two aspects of CAM treatment, talking about “not been tested as pharmaceutical products”. Many CAM approaches are far from being pharmaceutical products. They need to be tested as systems of care in a whole systems manner. Only by doing our research also from that viewpoint, will we be able to come close to making the kind of statements about the treatments in general that you and your colleagues are professing in the letter to the NHS trusts.

In this field of medicine and research it is very important to be just as precise when making public statements as we do in other fields.

Vinjar

From: Michael

Sent: 7. juni 2006 13:53

To: Vinjar Fønnebø

Subject: RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Vinjar,

I think we disagree about homeopathy. My position is very clear. The mechanism of action proposed is utterly absurd and therefore to tests for efficacy have to be particularly vigorous. The totality of the evidence confirms that homeopathy is nothing more than a placebo. Placebo therapies have their place but let’s be honest about this.

We only continue to debate homeopathy because of its antiquity and its popularity. In this respect it is no different than astrology. I suggest you read the attached paper which describes how orthodox medicine has been stigmatised by the proponents of alternative medicine to suit their own agenda.

Mike

The attached paper was: Marcus DM. How Should Alternative Medicine Be Taught to Medical Students and Physicians? Acad. Med. 2001;76;224–9.

From: Vinjar Fønnebø

Date: 06/07/06 20:14:27

To: Michael

Subject: RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Michael,

I am not so sure that we disagree on homeopathy. The challenge is to separate research on and statements about homeopathic remedies from “homeopathy” as a treatment system.

In your mail you still refer to homeopathy as synonymous with homeopathic remedies. Homeopathy as a system treatment approach seems to have a number of non-specific effects that are beneficial for groups of patients, even though the homeopathic remedies they are given lack efficacy.

If patients seek homeopathy and gain a total treatment experience larger than that which can be obtained from a well-researched pharmaceutical drug, we are faced with a clinical challenge. The challenge is whether it is ethically appropriate for a treatment system to retain a non-efficacious symbol (the remedy) in order to reach a treatment goal. I am not sure.

This is the reason why I recommend more research on whole systems of treatment before or simultaneously with research on the system’s specific components. In conventional medicine we rarely see the need to research modern medicine as a system. We are mainly busy refining its tools, and doing a really good job at it.

Patients with some ailments, illnesses and conditions are, however, still seeking CAM treatments based on word-of-mouth, peer experiences or rumors. I think we need to be humble when faced with this reality. Maybe our conventional system of care is experienced as inferior even though the patients have ample experience with conventional care. It is also interesting to notice that patients are very selective about what conditions they seek CAM care for. Conditions where they know from experience that conventional medicine is clearly superior are rarely brought to CAM practitioners.

Thank you for this paper. I agree with the author in all the main conclusions. These stereotypical attitudes have way too long dominated the public debate. A similar paper could have been written on the stereotypical opinions conventional medicine have about CAM. Having worked on the middle ground for many years, I try to convince both sides that the time has come for abandonment of the stereotypes and rather try to find common ground, if possible. The patients would welcome it, and the really lunatic fringe can better be isolated.

I appreciate this dialogue with you, and hope that you can agree with me that we need to separate opinions about and research on systems of care from opinions about and research on components within a system. By doing that, I feel we would progress one step forward and be much more scientific in our approach.

Vinjar

From: Michael

Sent: 9. juni 2006 11:12

To: Vinjar Fønnebo

Subject: RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Vinjar:

If you mean the “homeopathic system” to include; a) a leisurely interview, b) an alternative explanation of the patient’s symptoms and c) the prescribing of water, falsely labeled as containing molecules of the active ingredient or the “memory” of such compounds, then I would suggest that any benefit the patient achieves could be equally achieved by an equally leisurely consultation with a kindly doctor plus the prescription of a placebo. So in other words instead of homeopathy we need more doctors with more time. Now don’t tell me doctors aren’t good at doing “kind” or doing “listening”, we teach them these skills in our undergraduate courses of professional development. Sadly working in the NHS with 10 minutes a patient they are danger of losing their skills. That aside you must always compare like with like.

If you don’t mean a),b),c) above then I’m afraid you’ve lost me.

Mike

From: Vinjar Fønnebo

Date: 06/09/06 10:28:08

To: Michael

Subject: *** SPAM *** RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts
Dear Michael,

I mean exactly a, b, and c and several other aspects of the encounter between the CAM provider and the patient. I agree with you that this is something doctors also hold as important and desirable components of their patient encounters (with the exception of only prescribing a placebo). If doctors had the opportunity of practicing these good aspects of the consultation, they could probably also achieve better clinical results. As you say, the time constraints in the NHS system hinder them from practicing their good abilities and skills.

It is therefore important to research CAM practices as a system. The little research that has been done so far seems to support what we all believe: That patients appreciate and benefit from these systems of care. The next step is to discuss and determine whether systems of care can include

components that we “know” are without any specific effect. That is a medico-ethical question that is relevant in much wider circles than homeopathy.

Personally I think the effects some patients report from being treated in homeopathy as a system could be achieved in any system of care if it included the aspects a, b, and c and some more. In that manner research into CAM could contribute to show how necessary these other aspects are in all meetings between a patient and a health care worker, whether it be in conventional medicine or in different aspects of CAM.

In some conditions, like bacterial meningitis (as I used in Brussels) and other life-threatening acute conditions, all the a’s and b’s and c’s play a minimal role, and we only need tools that are well documented in rigid trials. For some chronic conditions with substantial psychosocial components the picture is not quite that clear.

Are we in reasonable agreement now?

Vinjar

Fra: Michael

Sendt: Saturday, June 10, 2006 13:25

Til: Vinjar Fønnebo

Emne: Re: *** SPAM *** RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Vinjar,

We are now very close to an agreement. In fact when I was reminded of your slides I realised how close we were.

Pictures v. 1000 words eh?

This is a good result from a polite disputation.

Mike

The slides Michael Baum is referring to can be found here: <http://uit.no/65/1521/27>

From: Vinjar Fønnebo

Date: 06/11/06 14:47:05

To: Michael

Subject: SV: *** SPAM *** RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Dear Michael,

I have also appreciated very much our “dispute”. This dispute might be relevant to share with a wider audience in some way. Would you be willing to co-author something along these lines with me for publication in an international journal?

Vinjar

From: Michael
Sent: 12. juni 2006 11:56
To: Vinjar Fønnebø
Subject: Re: SV: *** SPAM *** RE: SV: Letter to the NHS trusts

Great idea.
Mike

COMMENTS

We think publication of this e-mail exchange warrants few additional comments. The only one we will present is the importance of an open dialogue between individuals who, in one way or another, are involved in research, education, regulation

and clinical practice touching on the field of “complementary,” “alternative,” and “integrated” medicine. As can be seen in this exchange between the two of us, even researchers who well are acquainted with the field, benefit from discussing and challenging each other. By entering into the dialogue we both achieved a clearer understanding of both the understanding and opinion of the other as well as our own positions.

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