



Grupo de Estudios “Masi Elizalde”

HAHNEMANN'S FRAGMENTA DE VIRIBUS MEDICAMENTORUM POSITIVIS

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'The conclusion to which Hahnemann came, that medicines must be tested on the healthy body before they can be properly applied in disease must have been attended with feelings almost akin to despair, when on examining the records of medicine he found so little of a positive nature was known concerning the pure action of drugs, and when he became convinced that the whole business of testing medicines on the healthy had yet to be done.' [Dudgeon, p.177]

This short article collects together some of the published material about Hahnemann's little-known and rarely discussed essay of 1805, which presented to the world for the first time the records of his first provings of single medicines, which he had undertaken on himself and members of his family.

'After the first discovery of the healing principle (1796) he collated the effects of injurious medicines and poisons from all the old and recent literature... which was at his disposal. Thus he obtained in the years 1796-8 a partly useable materia medica, with the help of which he began to treat patients according to his newly discovered therapeutic principle. But he soon noticed that the extant reports of others were inadequate, inaccurate and consequently thoroughly unreliable...I made it a serious occupation for myself to prove several drugs on the healthy human body. The results of these investigations were then collected in his book: 'Fragmenta de viribus medicamentorum'...' [Haehl, Vol 1, p.258]

'In 1805, he published a very important book in Leipzig entitled 'Fragmenta de viribus medicamentorum positivis sive in sano corpore humano observatis'. The book was in two parts: Part 1 listed the symptoms produced by drugs on the healthy body and Part 2 listed the twenty-six [sic] remedies.' [Cook, p.95]

'...in a few years more he was able to give to the world a tolerable array of medicinal substances whose pure pathogenetic actions he had ascertained by



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experiments on himself, his family, and a few friends...merely styled them 'Fragmentary Observations relative to the Positive Powers of Medicines on the Human Body'. This work was merely an earnest of what was to come; it was published in 1805.' [Dudgeon, p.181]

It is quite astonishing for us today to behold how truly systematic Hahnemann was:

'Day after day, he tested medicines on himself and others. He collected histories of cases of poisoning. His purpose was to establish a physiological doctrine of medical remedies, free from all suppositions, and based solely on experiments.' [Gumpert, p.92]

'Hahnemann sent his children into the fields to collect henbane, sumach, and deadly nightshade. They grew up like young priests of the Asclepieion of Cos... they felt the leaves, blossoms and tubers with small but expert hands... everyone was obliged to join in the work... for there was no other way to succeed in his titanic plan of rescuing the wealth of natural remedies from the quagmire of textbooks, and displaying it in the bright light of experience.' [Gumpert, pp.93-94]

Once he had started his provings, again he involved the whole of his family in the venture:

'The family huddled together; and every free moment of every one of them, from the oldest to the youngest, was made use of for the testing of medicines and the gathering of the most precise information on their observed effects.' [Gumpert, p.114]

As is well documented, throughout the 1780's he nursed a growing contempt for hypothetical systems of medical ideas, which did not work in practice, and believed that testing things through direct experiment was the only way to formulate a rational system of medical science:

'Medicine tests [provings] constitute one of the most critical points of Hahnemann's teachings. This grandiose attempt to acquire unhypothetical medical experience was outwardly justified by the complete lack of objective methods of investigation and experimental systems in those days...[Hahnemann had] the courage to break away from hypotheses and systems...' [Gumpert, p.122]

'For eighteen years I have been deviating from the ordinary practice of the medical art... I should be continually groping in the dark, and according to this or that



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(imagined) opinion, be prescribing treatments, which were only contained in the Materia Medica according to degree of fitness... our present knowledge of the power of medicines, resting as it does merely on vague observations, often merely on hypothetical opinions, and with the innumerable mass of arbitrary views of disease... this was a labyrinth...who is willing to accept as truth the assertions of the healing powers of medicines because they are printed in a hundred books... my attention had been repeatedly drawn to the delusions of the ordinary methods of healing... yet perhaps the whole nature of this science...is such that it is not capable of any great certainty' [Hahnemann in a letter to Hufeland; quoted in Haehl, vol 1, pp.64-65]

The accounts of his first provings, the forerunner of his 'Materia Medica Pura', were first published in 1805 as a long essay, the 'Fragmenta de viribus', which was published as a single volume in London by Dr Quin in 1834 (Bradford, p.80):

'...Hahnemann's 'Fragmenta de viribus medicamentorum positivis..' was published in Latin. This two-volume work gives us, for the first time, an insight into the remarkable, and so far unknown, methods of investigation which he employed. It supplies reports on the tests of twenty-seven medicines - the results of years of experiment on himself and his family.' [Gumpert, p.122]

The 27 drugs proved were as follows [Haehl, vol 2, p.82]:

[followed by number of symptoms obtained by Hahnemann and those by others]

Aconitum napellus 138 75
Acris tinctura (Causticum) 30 0
Arnica montana 117 33
Belladonna 101 304
Camphora 73 74
Cantharis 20 74 [not listed by Bradford, p.80]
Capsicum annum 174 3
Chamomilla 272 3
Cinchona 122 99
Cocculus 156 6
Copaifera balsamum 12 8
Cuprum vitriolatum 29 38
Digitalis 23 33
Drosera 36 4
Helleborus 32 25



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Hyoscyamus 45 290
Ignatia 157 19
Ipecac 70 13
Ledum 75 5
Mezereum 6 34
Nux vomica 257 51
(Papaver somniferum) Opium 82 192
Pulsatilla 280 29
Rheum 39 13
Stramonium 59 157
Valeriana 25 10
Veratrum album 161 106

As we can see, the number of symptoms which Hahnemann recorded for each drug ranges from 12 for Copaifera to 280 for Puls. Perhaps as an insight into his personality, or constitutional type, Hahnemann himself obtained the maximum number of symptoms from Chamomilla, Pulsatilla and Nux vomica; and the least number from Cantharis, Copaifera, Digitalis and Valeriana.

'Referring briefly to his 'Fragmenta de viribus medicamentorum positivis' he proceeds:

'The seed (strychnos nux vomica) capable of producing these symptoms, is of all known vegetable medicines the only one that is also capable of curing a great part of this prevalent fever, that is, of transforming it into health.' [Hahnemann in 'On The Prevailing Fever' quoted in Haehl, Vol 1, p.79]

'Although Hahnemann says in the preface to the book: 'nobody knows better than I do, how imperfect and insufficient it all is', it shows much diligence, extensive observation, and fearless love of truth. In Hufeland's Bibliothek Vol 16, page 181, the essay is said to be 'Uncommonly interesting and creditable'. In the scientific translation of the Ges. Med-chir. Literatur of the year 1805 (Page 409) Augustine calls the book 'the results of excellent experiments on the effect of medicines on the human organism.' Yet this work was and remained a fragment as Hahnemann modestly declared. A carefully prepared second edition, with numerous additions...has probably for this reason never appeared in print, whilst the whole of the results of provings on a healthy subject were published in the 'Materia Medica Pura'.' [Haehl, vol 2, p.82]



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In conclusion we might point out that Hahnemann was not entirely setting out on uncharted territory, as there had been a few ancient investigations of a similar type.

'Among the ancients it is only in the school of the Empiricists that we find experiments undertaken for the purpose of ascertaining the pathogenetic effects of drugs and poisons... Attalos Philomenter, King of Pergamos, tested the antidotal powers of Aconite, Hyoscyamus, Veratrum and Hemlock, etc. But it was chiefly the poetical physician Nicander of Colophon... to whom we are indebted for an account of the action of various poisons... it is remarkable, however, that these poetical records... have been pretty closely copied... even to the most absurd errors... and very little else of a positive character is to be met with in the records of ancient medicine.' [Dudgeon, pp.190-91]

As Dudgeon then goes on to point out, there were a few more recent attempts. He mentions Dr William Alexander of Edinburgh who undertook some near-fatal experiments of self-poisoning with Camphor, *'...but this excited very little attention, and had it not been for Hahnemann, who raised them up from oblivion, they would probably have remained altogether unknown.'* [ibid, p.191]. Which makes Hahnemann's experiments even more remarkable and original.

Sources

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