BHA Response to the EASAC Statement

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The statement by the European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC) on Homeopathic Products and Practices is little more than a rehash of previously published negative studies and reports, carefully selected from the wider body of homeopathic research to exclude any quality evidence supporting the efficacy of homeopathy.[1] EASAC's claim that its conclusions are based on "excellent science based assessments" by "authoritative and impartial bodies" is seriously undermined by the inclusion of the findings from the 2010 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's report on homeopathy. This flawed and discredited report was rejected by the government and an Early Day Motion[2] was signed by 70 MPs unhappy at the way the committee conducted its review. They were concerned that only four MPs from the committee voted on the report: three in favour of its conclusions with one abstention. Two of the MPs who supported the report didn't even attend the committee sessions to hear the evidence. The impartiality of the review was also questioned because it was chaired by an MP who was actively campaigning against homeopathy at the time.

Citing the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) 2015 review of homeopathy further damages the credibility of the EASAC statement. As a public funded body the NHMRC currently finds itself under investigation by the Commonwealth Ombudsman for a number of irregularities in the way it conducted its review.[3] These include:

- conducting the review twice, first in July 2012 and then the one published in March 2015. The existence of the first, which was more favourable to homeopathy, was never published. NHMRC say it rejected the first review's findings because it was poor quality, this is despite it being undertaken by a reputable scientist and author of NHMRC's own guidelines on how to conduct evidence reviews. FOI requests have revealed that Professor Fred Mendelsohn – a member of NHMRC's expert committee overseeing the review process – confirmed the first review to be of high quality saying, "I am impressed by the rigour, thoroughness and systematic approach given to this evaluation of the published reviews of efficacy and side-effects of homeopathy. Overall, a lot of excellent work has gone into this review

and the results are presented in a systematic, unbiased and convincing manner."

- the NHMRC said the results of the report published in 2015 were based on a "rigorous assessment of over 1800 studies". In fact results were based on only 176 studies.
- NHMRC used a method that has never been used in any other review, before or since. NHMRC decided that for trials to be "reliable" they had to have at least 150 participants and reach an unusually high threshold for quality. This is despite the fact that NHMRC itself routinely conducts studies with less than 150 participants. This unprecedented and arbitrary rule meant the results of 171 of the trials were completely disregarded as being "unreliable" leaving only five trials the NHMRC considered to be "reliable". As they assessed all five of these trials as negative, this explains how NHMRC could conclude that there was no "reliable" evidence.
- two independent experts also raised concerns over the conclusions of the 2015 report during peer review, prior to final publication. The Australasian Cochrane Centre, no less, commented that for some conditions, "…. 'no reliable evidence' does not seem an accurate reflection of the body of evidence"; a second expert felt "uncertain of the definitive nature of the report's conclusions". Surprisingly, the NHMRC chose not to act on this feedback and did not amend their conclusions.
- Professor Peter Brooks, chair of the NHMRC committee that conducted the 2015 review, initially failed to declare he was a member of an anti-homeopathy lobby group called Friends of Science in Medicine.
- contrary to NHMRC's own guidelines there was not one homeopathy expert on the committee.

It is notable that the last of the criticisms levelled at the NHMRC can also be applied to the EASAC working group that supposedly conducted its own analysis of the evidence.

The EASAC statement also references the 2005 Shang review, but once again fails to tell the whole story. Shang was widely reported to have compared 110 similar trials on homeopathy and conventional medicine, and reached the conclusion that homeopathy is no better than placebo. However, the conclusions of this study were in fact based on only eight of the 110 trials, none of which involved usual homeopathic care. Furthermore, if just one of the eight trials was switched for a different one from the 110, the results show that homeopathy does work beyond

placebo.[4] This demonstrates that the findings of this study are completely unreliable.

The EASAC working group responsible for this statement appears to have conducted very little – if any – scientific analysis of the evidence available on homeopathy, preferring instead to blindly accept and repeat the questionable findings of studies and reports that support their own prejudiced views on the subject. A rigorous analysis of evidence should also be applied to studies critical of homeopathy, not just those that have produced positive results. By citing the questionable studies and reports listed above, it is clear on this occasion EASAC has failed to adopt this objective approach to scientific analysis.

References

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