

PRESENTATION

Homeopathy in Latin America and Spain: local developments and international networks

Homeopathy is a controversial medical system widely practiced in the world today. Latin America and Spain are no exception. Despite homeopathy's ambiguous position within academic circles and public health institutions in the region, many licensed health practitioners, public health officers, pharmacists, and patients endorse, fund, and publicize it. This wide presence suggests long and profound roots that remain to be thoroughly examined.

For many years, history confined homeopaths to a large and diverse group of healers, quacks, and unlicensed doctors practicing medicine in the region. The consolidation of the history of medicine as a professional field in the first decades of the twentieth century allowed for the publication of works on the development of national medical professions. In Latin America and Spain, historical works written mainly by doctors reinforced a triumphalist discourse of professional medicine, where homeopathy and other medical knowledge was minimized or simply excluded. In their work of synthesis on the history of medicine and public health in Latin America, Cueto and Palmer (2015) regret the lack of historical attention paid to homeopathy. In recent years, there has been a turn in which historians have complicated our thinking about the hegemony of licensed doctors and the professional inroads made by homeopathy have served as measures of the limits of medical professionalization (Carrillo, 2010; González Korzeniewski, 2010; Luz, 2014).

The articles in this dossier respond to this turn. Together, they form a diverse collection of essays highlighting the rich histories and public health contributions of homeopathy in Latin America and Spain. Their methodology combines traditional and novel historiographical and public health approaches, aiming at understanding homeopathy's past and present. The public discussion surrounding homeopathy, then as now, has tried to reduce the problem to a simple question: whether homeopathy is effective or not. The authors included in this collection demonstrate that simple questions cannot be posed to a complex problem. For all of them, the lingering question is about the changing conditions of past and present societies that have promoted, supported, restricted, or blocked homeopathy. The responses have common trends and local specificities across the examined nations.

These works bring back discussions on the process of professionalization in works from the last decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, they examine the role of introducers, their credentials, their interaction with local medical schools and societies,

professional practice, commercial activities, certification, and the public reception of their work. They do it, however, with a clear emphasis on their global relevance. They show the complex networks of actors and institutions, as well as the nuanced processes of circulation of medical knowledge, therapies, and products to and from the Americas and within the region. Histories of homeopathy in Latin American nations and Spain have a global relevance because they adapted the pattern of professionalization modeled by industrialized societies to their own particular socio-political situation. In these histories, homeopaths are agents of modernization in conversation and competition with other medical authorities.

Local contexts framed the development of homeopathic institutions in each particular country. This is particularly evident when scholars use the comparative method. The dossier includes a study following this approach that compares the introduction of homeopathy in Brazil and Sweden. The other articles underscore the local developments in Barcelona, Colombia, Lima, Mexico City, Recife, and Rio Grande do Sul in different historical moments and emphasizing different historical actors. Issues concerning the introduction, adaptation, and acceptance of homeopathic practitioners and products in the context for establishing boundaries among the different health professions figure most prominently in works analyzing the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Religion and spiritualism in particular played a key role in the dissemination of homeopathy in Rio Grande do Sul. The question of the evaluation and incorporation of homeopathy to national medical education and public health systems figures prominently in articles studying the last decades of the twentieth century. A gap in scholarly work about homeopathy in the decades of the mid-twentieth century still exists.

There is no single monograph examining the junctions between global and local historical trends in homeopathy in Latin America and Spain. The dossier aims to fill this gap. It combines a collection of articles that investigate the historical, historiographical, and public health relevance of homeopathy in these countries, while engaging with the literature on homeopathy produced around the world. We hope this collection encourages scholars to work on a comparative and global history of homeopathy in and from the region, motivates other scholars to work on the history and contemporary relevance of homeopathy, and opens up opportunities for an expanded scholarly network interested in this therapy.

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