

Teaching Homeopathy in U.S. Pharmacy Schools

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Abstract

Objectives: Pharmacists often advise patients on the use of over-the counter (OTC) medications. A class of medications that is growing in popularity is homeopathic products. Little is known about student pharmacist education about homeopathy. The objectives of this study were to: 1) describe homeopathic topics being taught in pharmacy schools and 2) evaluate faculty views about pharmacists' roles in counseling patients about homeopathic products. **Method:** An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was used. Online surveys were distributed to 3,300 pharmacy practice faculty members representing all schools accredited in the US. Frequencies were calculated to describe faculty characteristics and their responses. Moreover, 18 interviews of faculty involved with teaching homeopathy were conducted to learn about homeopathy teaching and expectations about roles of pharmacists in counseling patients. **Results:** Survey data were collected from 365 respondents. Over half (84 of 137) of the responding pharmacy schools reported teaching homeopathy to pharmacy students. In addition, the responses from most of the interviewed faculty were summarized into two themes which emphasized that pharmacists should be knowledgeable and able to counsel patients effectively to ensure they benefit from taking homeopathic products. **Conclusion:** Over half of US pharmacy schools are teaching students about homeopathy topics. Further, there was support for pharmacists being able to counsel effectively about homeopathic products.

Keywords: Homeopathy, pharmacy education, teaching, role of pharmacist

Introduction

Homeopathy is a type of alternative medicine based on a theory of treating like with like using very diluted products.¹ Following a "law of infinitesimals", homeopathic products are indicated to have greater effectiveness with very low doses.² Worldwide, it is estimated that over 200 million people use homeopathic products on regular basis. Moreover, some countries such as Brazil, India, China, Mexico, Pakistan and Switzerland include homeopathy in their national health systems.³ In the U.S., the 2012 National Health Interview Survey found that 2.2% of adults and 1.8% of children ages 4 to 17 had used homeopathic medicine within the previous year.⁴ It has been reported that the most common types of problems treated with homeopathic medicines are respiratory and otolaryngological (18.5%), musculoskeletal (12.3 %), chronic pain (7.7 %), and gastrointestinal (5.0 %).⁵ In the U.S., homeopathic products are sold as over the counter (OTC) products, through various channels (e.g. in stores, online). The U.S. retail sales of homeopathic products in 2018, was estimated at \$473.3 million.⁶

In 1938, the Federal Food Drug and Cosmetic Act classified homeopathic medications as drugs.⁷ This legislation essentially grandfathered many homeopathic products into this class of drug, and does not require clinical research on safety and

effectiveness that is needed for prescription medications. Homeopathic products are based on key principles of homeopathy, including the law of similars and high levels of dilution to deliver very small doses.⁸ The law of similars states that a substance causing certain symptoms in a healthy person can help cure someone suffering from those same symptoms due to illness. Homeopathic products are greatly diluted through a series of dilutions followed by shaking or succussion. The ingredients in a homeopathic product are usually listed in terms of dilution e.g. 1X, 6C, 2M. The designation "X" indicates a 1:10 dilution, and "C" represents an initial dilution of 1 to 100 and 6C means repeating that 6 times.⁸ Because these basic tenets conflict with modern medicine, pharmacology and therapeutics, the effectiveness of homeopathic products can be viewed skeptically by many pharmacists.

Since homeopathic products are legal drugs in the U.S., pharmacists should have a role in assuring their safe and effective use. For example, some believe that pharmacists should acquire basic knowledge about homeopathic products as part of their responsibility to care for patients. Within this essential knowledge, pharmacists should be able to differentiate between complementary, allopathic and homeopathic products.⁹ In addition, pharmacists can be asked to assess the patient's need for self-treatment before recommending OTC products, including homeopathic remedies, and help patients pursue an appropriate path to health.¹⁰

On one hand, pharmacists have an ethical responsibility to do what is best for their patients, while respecting their patients' treatment preferences.¹⁰ If a patient asks about using a homeopathic product for appropriate self-treatment, a pharmacist could support use of that product to treat

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symptoms. Alternatively, some pharmacists may consider all use of homeopathic products inappropriate because of limited clinical research and lack of established mechanism of action for many of these products. In this case, the pharmacist counseling a patient interested in taking a homeopathic remedy could advise the patient against using that product. This side of the debate might argue that homeopathy should not be taught because patients should not use such products. Although no studies surveyed actual pharmacists about teaching homeopathy, graduates who had taken homeopathy courses were more comfortable answering patient questions, were able to explain the mechanism of action of homeopathic products, and felt more able to provide recommendations to their patients.¹¹ Also in that study, practicing pharmacists showed limited knowledge of homeopathic products, despite having such products available for purchase.¹¹

In addition, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) has set fundamental standards to make sure that professional degree programs in Pharmacy will afford doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) graduates with abilities and behaviors that prepare them to work as medication expert (including homeopathic medicines), to provide patient-centered care, and to be attentive about collecting accurate information from the patients. With this preparation, PharmD graduates can assist in formulating the proper assessment, and in providing optimal recommendations. Graduates need to be trained on problem-solving by evaluating variables to draw the most beneficial conclusion and educate the patient. Additionally, graduates are expected to accommodate patients' needs, understand and value their desires, represent their best interests, and show the finest way to communicate thoughts and recommendations with them.¹²

The purpose of this study was to learn about teaching homeopathy to pharmacy students and pharmacists' roles related to homeopathy use. The objectives for this study were to: 1) describe how and which homeopathy topics are taught in US schools of pharmacy and 2) characterize pharmacist roles with patients interested in using homeopathic products.

Methods

An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach with a quantitative phase (online survey) followed by a qualitative phase (telephone or virtual interviews) was used to collect information about teaching homeopathy in US pharmacy schools. Using a list obtained from the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, links to an online survey were emailed to 3,300 U.S. pharmacy practice faculty through (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). We limited the survey distribution to Pharmacy Practice faculty to collect data on teaching homeopathy within both didactic and experiential parts of the curriculum. The survey included questions about faculty demographics and about teaching homeopathy (ie, whether homeopathy is taught at the school, how homeopathy is taught, which homeopathy topics

are covered, and methods used to teach homeopathy topics). Questions were developed after reviewing educational resources provided by a homeopathic manufacturer (Boiron USA). These questions were in the format of selecting the suitable option from a list (i.e. multiple choice questions), while the questions that asked about topics, courses, and methods used to teach homeopathy included an option that allowed the respondents to provide their own text responses. The initial survey was sent anonymously to the faculty between November 2021 and January 2022. No incentives were provided to the faculty members for survey completion. Two follow-up emails were sent about 10 and 20 days after the initial email based on the modified Dillman approach.¹³ The survey was pretested with 29 pharmacy practice faculty at the University of Iowa. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means) were calculated for the survey items.

The sampling approach allowed multiple respondents from each school of pharmacy. For the question about whether homeopathy topics are taught at a school of pharmacy, decision rules were used if differing responses were received from any given school. Specifically, a pharmacy school was considered teaching homeopathy if any of its respondents said "yes" that homeopathy topics are taught there. If different respondents from a single school of pharmacy said "no" and "don't know", then that school was considered not teaching homeopathy. Thus, in the presence of conflicting responses for a given school, any "yes" took priority over any other response, while "no" took priority over "don't know".

For the qualitative phase, 23 faculty members involved in teaching homeopathy, who completed the survey, were asked if they were willing to be interviewed. They added their academic emails so we could contact them. Those who agreed to be contacted for an interview were asked about teaching homeopathy and the role of pharmacists when caring for patients interested in using a homeopathic product. A total of 18 faculty members were contacted and agreed to be interviewed. When having more than one faculty member from the same pharmacy college, we interviewed the faculty member with more teaching experience. An interview guide was developed, using structured open-ended questions. Questions asked about interviewee descriptive background information, homeopathy teaching methods, homeopathy topics (e.g., products, principles & pharmacy practice) and the role of pharmacists on guiding patients when asked about homeopathic products. More information on the questions included in the interview guide are available in Appendix 1. Interviews were conducted over Zoom (San Jose, CA) meetings or via telephone. Faculty members who completed the interview received an \$80 gift card.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To develop themes related to roles for pharmacists for homeopathic products, two researchers coded two transcripts

independently, and then discussed any differences in coding to reconcile discrepancies and reach consensus. Phrases describing pharmacist activities or roles when interacting with patients about homeopathy product selection and use were identified. Similar concepts were aggregated to create themes with no specific guiding framework.¹⁴ Once a consensus was reached, then one researcher used the coding approach from the first interviews to code the remainder of the transcripts, and the second researcher assessed the appropriateness of codes made by the first coder. This project was deemed to not be human subjects' research by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board.

Results

We received 424 responses from the faculty among all US pharmacy schools, with 365 of these usable which accounts for about 11% response rate. The responses included faculty members that represent 137 universities out of 143, or 95.8% of accredited U.S. pharmacy schools. Fifty-nine respondents did not complete the whole survey; we considered a fully answered survey a usable response. The majority of the respondents (90%) held a PharmD degree, almost half had a PGY1 residency and 36% were in associate professor position (Table 1). Also, 62% had more than 10 years teaching experience and over half were teaching in public universities. For 44 schools of pharmacy, a conflict in responses of "yes" and "no" was present, and the decision rules were applied. This resulted in 84 (61.3%) of pharmacy schools having homeopathy in their curriculum, while 35 (25.5%) did not. Respondents from 18 (13.2%) schools did not know if homeopathy was taught there.

Moreover, 71 (50.0%) responses included homeopathy topics in the first professional pharmacy year, 52 (36.6%) in the second professional pharmacy year, 46 (32.4%) in the third year and 12 (8.5%) in the fourth year. Also, 72 (50.7%) of the respondents included homeopathy only in required courses, while 70 (49.3%) had them either solely in elective or in both elective and required courses. With regards to courses that incorporated homeopathy topics, 8 (5.8%) had them included in Basic Science Courses, 76 (55.5%) in Pharmacy Practice Courses, and 53 (38.7%) in Pharmacotherapy Courses. Table 2 shows examples of courses including homeopathy.

For reported teaching methods, 107 (75.4%) of the respondents from schools teaching homeopathy used lectures or discussions inside classrooms, 11 (7.7%) included homeopathy in experiential training and 6 (4.2%) in laboratory sessions. Also, 6 (4.2%) of the respondents used a mix of lectures, discussions and experiential training for homeopathy teaching. Poster presentations and student group presentations were reported by two respondents.

Eighteen interviews were conducted, involving 19 faculty members from 18 schools of pharmacy, with one interview

including two faculty. The interviews lasted an average of 23.2 minutes, with a range of 15 to 38 minutes. More than two-thirds of the interviewees were female, and 56% of their ages were between 35 and 50 years. Also, 56% were teaching in a public university, 44% were associate professors, 50% had teaching experience of 10-20 years, and 39% had more than 10 years' experience of teaching homeopathy. Table 3 provides a listing of teaching topics.

Three pharmacist roles and nine themes were identified (Table 4). One role was *pharmacists' preparedness to guide patients for using homeopathic products*. Three themes related to this role: 1) recognize the difference between homeopathic and allopathic or herbal products, 2) counsel the patients efficiently and 3) the pharmacist needs to be knowledgeable. A quote from this role was, "*Pharmacists should be able to discern what homeopathy means. When they see a product labeled homeopathic, critically evaluate that product to see if it really is a homeopathic product.*"

A second pharmacist role was to *ensure patients are getting benefits from using homeopathic products*. Three themes related to this role included: 1) prioritize patients' safety, 2) homeopathic remedies' effectiveness and 3) triage the patient for the best use of homeopathy. A quote illustrating this role was, "*Be able to triage a self-care condition alongside the patient and be able to recommend a product that's appropriate to treat that. And if that be a homeopathic product, then that's an available option for us to recommend.*"

The third pharmacist role for working with patients interested in homeopathic products was *communicating properly with patients*. The three themes related to this role were: 1) maintain your relationship with patients, 2) listen to, respect, and guide patients and 3) acknowledge that homeopathic products are available. A quote from this role was, "*I encourage them to keep an open mind about it. And part of that is developing a relationship with the patient. The patient, respect their autonomy.*"

Discussion

Homeopathy is a part of complementary and herbal medicines,¹⁵ and its use is based on the principle of similars and dilution. Including homeopathy in integrative medicine is a topic of debate, as integrative medicines tend to incorporate evidence-based complementary therapies with conventional treatment¹⁶. Results from a previous study found that weak evidence for a positive effect of homeopathy from placebo-controlled trials is the main reason for skepticism.¹⁷ The results of this study showed over half of schools of pharmacy are teaching homeopathic topics to PharmD students. Pharmacists are trained to follow an evidence-based approach to practice. So, the absence of such evidence for homeopathic products limits some pharmacists' willingness to embrace the use of homeopathic products by patients. However, since pharmacists

are in daily contact with patients and could be consulted on various homeopathic products, they need to be knowledgeable and prepared to counsel patients on the appropriate use of homeopathic products based on patients' symptoms and conditions.¹⁰ This thinking is consistent with the teaching of homeopathy so pharmacists would possess usable knowledge about homeopathic products. Also, according to pharmacist codes of ethics, pharmacists are asked as part of their profession and be knowledgeable about regulated drugs so that they can counsel their patients effectively.^{9,10} Since homeopathic products are legally available, pharmacists should have knowledge of them to be able to assist their patients.

Patients trusting pharmacists for their advice on using medications is an important element in the backbone of pharmacist-patient relationship. A survey in 2005 revealed that 43% of patient respondents said they consider pharmacists a trusted source for advice on natural health products such as homeopathy.¹⁸ That finding supports the notion that pharmacists are expected to be knowledgeable and able to provide comprehensive advice to patients about their therapy.¹⁰ Markedly, in this study, interviews with a sample of pharmacy practice faculty members emphasized the importance of *counseling patients efficiently by listening carefully to their needs, discussing safety and effectiveness issues with them, respecting their choices and not being judgmental*. Ultimately, this approach could assist in building a respectful relationship between pharmacist and patients, which is needed for providing optimal care.¹⁹

Pharmacy students rely on their schools to deliver the best teaching to prepare them to be skilled and responsive future pharmacists. Given the increased popularity of using homeopathic products in the U.S.,²⁰⁻²¹ pharmacy students should have a solid background about it from reliable resources and deliver useful advice to patients. In this study, over 60% of schools of pharmacy support pharmacy students learning about homeopathy. It is reasonable that more pharmacy schools could add homeopathic topics to their curricula. A study that assessed whether taking a course in Complementary and Integrative Health affected the knowledge and perceptions regarding homeopathy of the graduates of Idaho State University College of Pharmacy, showed that graduates who had taken the course were more comfortable answering patient questions, were able to explain the mechanism of action of homeopathic products and felt more able to provide recommendations to their patients.¹¹

The findings here provide some guidance about topics to be taught about homeopathy. Topics, such as FDA regulation of homeopathic products, the principles of similars, dilution and succussion, how to read a homeopathic label and notation, the US Homeopathic Pharmacopeia and the limited evidence on product effectiveness could be covered in one or two class sessions. In addition, our qualitative themes pointed to helping

pharmacy students develop skills to interact effectively with a patient interested in using a homeopathic product. *That is, they should assess the clinical situation to determine the appropriateness of self-treatment with a homeopathic product, be respectful of a patient's preferences and be knowledgeable of the homeopathic products available in the pharmacy.* Professional skill labs and perhaps experiential learning could be used to address these practice skills.

This study has some limitations. Fifty-nine faculty started the survey and did not complete it. The primary reason for dropout may have been unawareness about teaching of homeopathy in their school. The sampling approach did not attempt to identify a single key informant from each school, since both individual faculty responses were of interest as well as a school-level perspective. In addition, conservative decision rules were used to assign each responding school a status of teaching homeopathy or not. The qualitative data were coded by two researchers who brought their own experiences into their analyses. This may have affected what themes were developed.

Future work following these findings can include research focused on exploring community pharmacists' comprehension and familiarity with homeopathic products. Such research would help in understanding what kind of gap, if any, is present in pharmacists' knowledge about homeopathy. In addition, these findings could be used by faculty at pharmacy schools currently not teaching about homeopathy to discuss the viability of including homeopathy in their PharmD curricula, about 3-4 lectures per semester. These findings can assist in developing the appropriate content about homeopathy. Greater teaching of homeopathy can help more pharmacists counsel their patients regarding use of homeopathic products.

Conclusion

The teaching of homeopathy was reported as occurring in over 60 percent of schools of pharmacy. The findings support pharmacists knowing key basic information about homeopathic products, such as the concept of dilution, FDA regulation of homeopathic products, the principle of similars and how to read homeopathic dosage notation. In addition, those teaching homeopathy suggested that pharmacists should be knowledgeable about counseling patients about homeopathic products to meet their professional responsibility as medication experts.

Conflicts of Interest: None

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Table 1. Survey Respondent Characteristics

Variable	Frequency (%) *
Age	
Less than 35 years	68 (18.5)
35-50 year	173 (47.1)
51-65 year	100 (27.3)
More than 65 years	26 (7.1)
Gender	
Male	140 (38.5)
Female	222 (61.0)
Non-binary	2 (0.6)
University Type	
Public	188 (51.2)
Private	179 (48.8)
Post-grad training	
PGY1	114 (49.6)
PGY2	71 (30.9)
Postdoctoral fellowship (training)	23 (10.00) 22 (9.6)
Fellowship	
Years as faculty member	
Less than 10 years	140 (38.3)
10-20 years	128 (35.0)
More than 20 years	98 (26.8)
Position	
Assistant Professor	111 (30.3)
Associate Professor	131 (35.8)
Professor	101 (27.6)
Other	23 (6.3)

Note: we received 424 responses from faculty in US pharmacy schools, with 365 of these usable.

Table 2. Courses that included Homeopathy Topics

Basic Sciences Course	Pharmacy Practice Courses	Therapeutic/Pharmacotherapy Courses
Survey of Complementary Medicine, Dietary Supplements, Neuropharmacology and Medicinal Chemistry, Natural Products and Complementary & Integrative Health, Basic Pharmaceutics, Pharmacognosy/Complementary & Alternative Medicine	Self-care, Skills lab, Natural medicine, OTC, Self-care and the pharmacist, Toxicology, Preventive and self-care therapeutics, Complementary and alternative medicine, Patient centered care, Pharmacy practice II, Introduction to patient care, Homeopathy overview, Pharmacology and Therapeutics, Pharmacotherapeutics, Integrative health in Pharmacy, Pharmacy as profession, Introduction to Dietary, Supplement Therapeutics, Pharmacy Law, Ambulatory care, Community pharmacy	Endocrine, Herbal medicine, Complementary and Alternative Medicine, Pharmacotherapy, Integrated therapeutics modules, Integrative health medicine, Non-prescription therapeutics, Non-prescription pharmacotherapeutics and Self-Care, Nutraceuticals, Pharmacist-guided Self-Care, Therapeutic Principles of Self-Care, Toxicology

Table 3. Teaching Topics in Homeopathy According to Faculty Interviews

Concept of dilution
FDA regulation
Principle of similars
Homeopathic products in pharmacy
Definition of homeopathy
Effectiveness
Safety
History of homeopathy
Homeopathic dosage notation
How to read a label for homeopathic product
Concept of succussion
Principle of infinitesimal
Homeopathic Pharmacopeia
Difference between homeopathy, dietary supplements and OTC
Homeopath's training and licensing
The practice of homeopathy
Statistics of the users in the US

Table 4. Selected Quotes on Roles of Pharmacists when Patients ask about Homeopathic Products

Pharmacists' Role and Supporting Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Pharmacists' preparedness to guide patients for using homeopathic products.	
1. Recognize the difference between homeopathic and allopathic or herbal products.	"I don't think that patients recognize that it's homeopathic. I think that with the drug facts label, they think it's the same as like Tylenol and Ibuprofen."
	"I would expect the pharmacist to know the principles and when people want to ask them about it, they should be able to tell them that they're diluted, which is opposite of what drugs are."
2. Counsel the patients efficiently.	"Educate the customers: what these are, what are appropriate expectations and possibilities of risk."
	"So I warn, give patients that if they're going to respond to it, they're going to respond. If not, then I usually give a time limit too if it doesn't get better, then you probably need to seek medical help."
3. Pharmacist needs to be knowledgeable.	"Pharmacists should be able to discern what homeopathy means. When they see a product labeled homeopathic, critically evaluate that product to see if it really is a homeopathic product."
	"The patient was standing in the aisle trying to find something and that one caught their eye. And then they brought it over to the pharmacy and they were asking about it."
Ensure patients are getting benefits from using homeopathic products	
1. Prioritize patients' safety.	"That's always my take home for the students, drug interactions and side effects."
2. Homeopathic remedies' effectiveness.	"You have to take the patient as a holistic and if that's what they feel and it's not going to harm, then I have no problem."
	"Pharmacists have a burden of knowing, or looking up, how long the patient should wait to expect a response."
3. Triage the patient for the best use of homeopathy.	"Things to watch for. If your symptoms are not improving within a couple of days, come back, contact your primary care provider, things along those lines."
	"Be able to triage a self-care condition alongside the patient and be able to recommend a product that's appropriate to treat that. And if that be a homeopathic product, then that's an available option for us to recommend."
	"That's one of the main tenants of, is the patient a candidate for self-care and what are the drawbacks of self-care?"
Communicating properly with patients	

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1. Maintain your relationship with patients.
- “I encourage them to keep an open mind about it. And part of that is developing a relationship with the patient. The patient, respect their autonomy.”
- “Approaching patients who are interested in homeopathic products can be really difficult because we have many times strong opinions about their lack of efficacy. But when you let that onto a patient, you can destroy a relationship.”
2. Listen to, respect, and guide patients.
- “We want to collaborate with them, with the patient, and I encourage that. And so listening to them, not being judgmental.”
- “Patients have preferences and it's our role to be able to accommodate their preference as long as it's going to be safe and effective.”
3. Acknowledge that homeopathic products are available.
- “Pharmacists understand that the product is out there and that it's available and how to best recommend it.”
- “They should just be aware of it as something that might be sold somewhere they work.”
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Appendix 1. Interview Guide**Descriptive Background Information**

1. Please tell me about your experience/background with Homeopathy? (Use and teaching)
2. How did you/do you learn about homeopathy and homeopathic products?

Description of Homeopathy Teaching

3. Please briefly describe what homeopathic topics are taught at your school of pharmacy and how they are taught.

PROBES

- A. Are these Homeopathy topics included in a required or an elective course?
- B. Are these Homeopathy topics covered in the classroom vs. experiential? Please describe what is done.
- C. What kind of references (book, guidelines) do you use to teach students homeopathy topics? What should they know about the Homeopathic Pharmacopeia of the United States?
- D. What kind of feedback do you usually get from PharmD students about homeopathy topics?
- E. What kind support or resistance to homeopathy, if any, have you seen from your faculty or preceptors?

Information about Homeopathy (Products, Principles & Pharmacy Practice)

4. What are some key Homeopathic products that pharmacists should learn about?
5. Which principles of Homeopathy are vital to be learned by pharmacists?
(Law of similars, Suppression)
6. What are your expectations about the applications/uses of Homeopathy in pharmacy practice?

PROBE

- A. What role(s) should pharmacists play when patients select or ask about a homeopathic product?