



Optional course «Homeopathically potentised substances: placebos or effective?» for medical students at the University of Bern, Switzerland

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Background

Apart from compulsory lectures on classical homeopathy (CH), traditional Chinese medicine/acupuncture, neural therapy and anthroposophically extended medicine (AEM), our institute at the University of Bern offers several optional practical courses for medical students.

The aim of this course during autumn 2011 and spring 2012 was to discuss basic research, observational and clinical studies in the fields of CH and AEM, so that students

- i) learned how to read and appraise scientific publications,
- ii) learned how complementary medicine can be investigated with scientific methods, and
- iii) were able to form their own opinion about the possible specific effects and effectiveness of homeopathically potentised substances.

Methods

Introductory lectures on AEM, CH and study design were given to 12 second year medical students. The students appraised 12 research articles (see discussed research articles below) and presented the results in class, followed by discussions with experts in the fields of basic and clinical research from our institute. A company producing homeopathic remedies was visited and students could practise potentization procedures, both succussion (shaking) and trituration.

At the end of the course, students compiled posters with arguments in favour of and against specific effects and effectiveness as well as their own conclusions.

The course was evaluated using a written questionnaire with closed and open questions.

Results

- Previous knowledge about CH and AEM was scarce among the students. It slightly increased during the course, and the course fostered their interest in the topic (Figure 1).
- This course was chosen by most students, because they were genuinely interested in the topic (and not because other courses were already fully booked).
- The students especially valued the discussions, the various perspectives presented to them, and experiencing a potentization process (Table 1).

Conclusion

- Medical students were interested to learn more about homeopathically potentised substances.
- The variation in study results made it difficult for them to form their own opinion.
- Apart from appraising articles, the students would have liked to meet and talk with patients. This possibility is offered in another optional course, «Insights into complementary medical practice», including practices of CH, AEM, traditional Chinese medicine/acupuncture and neural therapy.

Fig. 1: Answers to the closed evaluation questions (n=10).

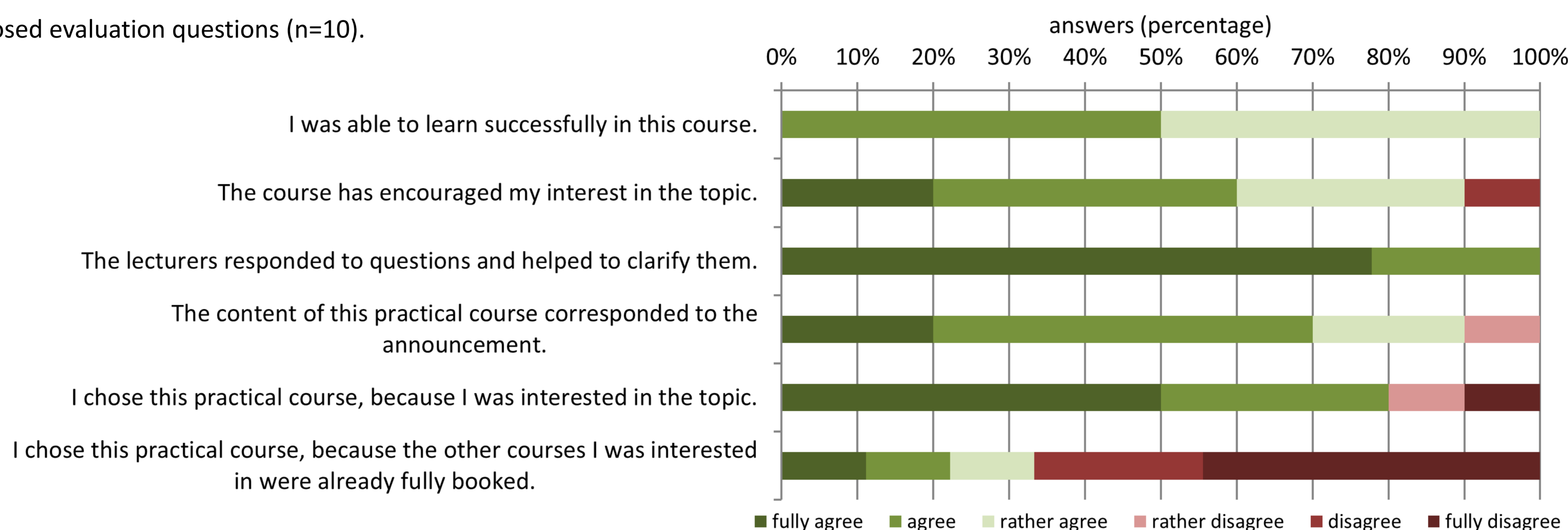


Table 1: Answers to the question: «What did you like especially about this course?»

- introductory lectures (mentioned 6 times)
- visiting company producing homeopathic remedies, potentising (5)
- interesting discussions, being able to express own opinion frankly (5)
- interesting studies, comparing various studies, learning how studies are done in complementary medicine (4)
- different views on the topic, talking to people practising homeopathy, commitment of physicist, tutors working in research and practice (4)
- liked it generally (1)

Discussed research articles

1. Belon P et al. Histamine dilutions modulate basophil activation. *Inflamm Res* 2004;53:181-188.
2. Betti L et al. Effect of high dilutions of Arsenicum album on wheat seedlings from seed poisoned with the same substance. *Br Homeopath J* 1997;86:86-89.
3. Binder M et al. The effects of a 45x potency of Arsenicum album on wheat seedling growth – a reproduction trial. *Forsch Komplementärmed* 2005;12:284-291.
4. Frass M et al. Influence of potassium dichromate on tracheal secretions in critically ill patients. *Chest* 2005;127:936-941.
5. Frass M et al. Adjunctive homeopathic treatment in patients with severe sepsis: a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial in an intensive care unit. *Homeopathy* 2005;94:75-80.
6. Frei H et al. Homeopathic treatment of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: a randomized, double blind, placebo controlled crossover trial. *Eur J Pediatr* 2005;164:758-767.
7. Guggisberg AG. Replication study concerning the effects of homeopathic dilutions of histamine on human basophil degranulation in vitro. *Complement Ther Med* 2005;13:91-100.
8. Hamre HJ. Anthroposophic therapies in chronic disease: the anthroposophic medicine outcomes study (AMOS). *Eur J Med Res* 2004;9:351-360.
9. Hamre HJ et al. Anthroposophic vs. conventional therapy for chronic low back pain: a prospective comparative study. *Eur J Med Res* 2007;12:302-310.
10. Jacobs J et al. Homeopathy for attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder: a pilot randomized-controlled trial. *J Altern Complement Med* 2005;11:799-806.
11. Riley D et al. Homeopathy and conventional medicine: an outcomes study comparing effectiveness in a primary care setting. *J Altern Complement Med* 2001;7:149-159.
12. Walach H. Magic signs: a non-local interpretation of homeopathy. *Br Homeopath J* 2000;89:127-140.