

## **EDITORIAL**

### **Reinventing vitalism**

Vitalism, the idea that life cannot be entirely explained in terms of chemical and physical processes is 'written into' homeopathy.<sup>1</sup> Hahnemann referred frequently to the 'spirit-like' vital force. For instance 'without the vital force the material organism is unable to feel, or act, or maintain itself'.<sup>2</sup> In this, unlike many other areas of his thought, Hahnemann was in line with the orthodoxy of his time, belief in the 'Vis medicatrix naturae': the natural healing force was the norm among his medical contemporaries.

But his was among the last generations of doctors to take the existence of the vital force for granted. Vitalism was generally abandoned by western medicine during the 19th century, as a consequence of the scientific revolution which transformed the understanding of medicine during that period. The abandonment of vitalism was closely associated with the discrediting of the idea of spontaneous generation by two of the great medical scientists of 19th century, the founder of modern pathology, Virchow, and the founder of modern microbiology, Pasteur. Virchow demonstrated 'omnia cellula e cellulae' (all cells come from other cells); previously it had been believed that cells could arise in the body from an acellular 'blastema'. Pasteur showed that spontaneous generation also did not occur for microbes. It is notable that, except in a few restricted areas, this scientific revolution did not have much impact on the generally very low efficacy of 19th century medicine, although it laid the foundations for great therapeutic advances in the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Vitalism and complexity**

'Vital force' is now generally perceived as referring to an abstract principle, intangible and difficult even to define, let alone measure. That it is a metaphysical concept has been taken for granted, even in this journal, by former editors.<sup>4</sup> But recent insights deriving from complexity theory, particularly 'emergent properties' (behaviours of a system which cannot be predicted from the properties of its component parts alone), offer new ways of thinking about vitalism, founded firmly in modern scientific concepts.

In our last issue we featured a provocative article by Lionel Milgrom, which made a bid to reinstate vitalism in terms of complexity theory and the physical concept of spin.<sup>5</sup> Milgrom used the metaphor of a gyroscope, and in this issue Lionel Torres uses the behaviour of the internet as a simile.<sup>6</sup> Torres asks what the material basis of this network might be in living organisms, and suggests cellular components of the immune system, although his theory does not depend on this. Other authors have taken a more concrete approach to the problem, developing a general model of regulation of stressed homeostatic networks, on the basis of a series of experiments.<sup>7</sup>

Forthcoming issues of Homeopathy will further develop this discussion, again drawing insights from control and complexity theory, but illustrated by data from clinical trials.

#### **Does it matter?**

Vitalism is virtually taboo in modern scientific discourse, associated with metaphysical and prescientific ideas. It is hard to understand why this should be so:

at a minimum it simply refers to the innate tendency of living organisms to self-heal and restore dynamic equilibrium, a property almost so self-evident as to escape notice. Although there is abundant knowledge of the specific mechanisms involved: inflammation, immunity, homeostasis, etc., there is little modern research or theory on the broader patterns, the circumstances under which these mechanisms fail, and how they may be stimulated. Homeopathy is based on the idea of stimulating, facilitating or directing the body's own self-healing processes, repair and maintenance mechanisms by giving medicines which simulate what has gone wrong, 'virtual diseases'. These ideas are difficult even to think about in a general or synthetic way, given the limitations of current concepts. It is for this reason that developments in homeopathy are now driving a fascinating revival of thinking in the area.

Does this matter? For day-to-day practice, probably not much. For most of us who practice homeopathy, finding the right medicine is a fairly empirical business. But in the longer term, the effects of a new understanding of the dynamics by which living organisms achieve, or fail to achieve, whole system integration and self-healing may be profound. Rather as antivitalistic theories in the 19th century had little immediate impact on practical therapeutics, but enabled a revolution in the following century, a new vitalism may have unforeseen consequences, and may contribute to reversing or averting the declining rate of progress in medicine perceived by some commentators.

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#### **References**

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