

FOUR

The Years of Hope

At Hahnemann's death his doctrine had already spread widely in spite of opposition, and homoeopaths felt confident that it would not be long before they had achieved recognition as practitioners of the one true form of medicine. Homoeopathy was to be found not only in Germany and France, the two countries where Hahnemann himself had practised, but also in England, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia, Poland and Russia; it had crossed the Atlantic to both Americas, and it had taken root in India, still today the country where it flourishes most successfully.

At this time homoeopaths were not content to rest upon the labours of the Master; many of them took up various aspects of his teachings and developed them in new directions. In the next chapter I shall look at what happened to the potency idea, but here I am concerned with the new provings that were conducted by some of his more adventurous followers, sometimes at considerable personal risk.

In spite of their fundamental importance for homoeopathy, both of Hahnemann's major contributions to pharmacology – the *Materia Medica Pura* and *The Chronic Diseases* – were flawed, as we have seen, by serious disadvantages. The *Materia Medica Pura* was so arranged as to be almost unreadable, consisting as it did of mere lists of symptoms arranged anatomically; so that, in the words of Richard Hughes an eminent British homoeopath of the day, the would-be reader of Hahnemann's article on *Aconite* begins with *Vertigo* and ends with *Rage*. As for *The Chronic Diseases*, it suffered from the same problems of arrange-

ment and in addition there were serious doubts about its reliability.

Many homoeopaths, therefore, while not questioning Hahnemann's genius or importance, felt that there was a need to re-prove his medicines to see whether the symptoms he had found could be reproduced. They also wanted to test new medicines for their possible application to disease. For these reasons the second half of the nineteenth century saw an astonishing spate of provings, especially in Germany, Austria, and the USA.

Some provings were carried out by Hahnemann's followers in Germany even within the Master's lifetime, and indeed the proving idea was taken up by an eminent non-homoeopath, Professor Jörg, whose findings were incorporated by Hahnemann, with acknowledgement, in the second edition of *The Chronic Diseases*. Hahnemann could in fact claim to have begun a practice that continues in orthodox medicine today, for modern doctors still test drugs on themselves from time to time as well as on patients.

Some of the most interesting and extensive provings of the later nineteenth century were carried out by the Austrian Homoeopathic Society, which re-proved a number of Hahnemann's medicines and also some new ones. Homoeopathy was taken to the USA by Constantine Hering, who proved many old and new medicines, including the venom of the bushmaster snake which he investigated while in South America. A later American homoeopath, Dr Hale of Chicago, took up the study of the large number of indigenous American plants that were used by herbalists and others who practised folk-medicine at this time. Hale incorporated the new medicines into homoeopathy, and indeed some were taken up by orthodox medicine as well. Hale did not himself conduct provings but others did, although it seems certain that many medicines were adopted by homoeopaths without the formality of a proper Hahnemannian proving. This tended to blur somewhat the distinction between homoeopathy and herbalism.

The narrative accounts of these nineteenth century provings are often extraordinarily dramatic and full of interest. The provers often went to lengths that can only be called heroic, and their records provide striking evidence of their homoeopathic zeal. It is certain that work of this kind will never be repeated, which makes it of unique historical interest, if nothing else. And yet the surprising fact is that today all these original reports remain locked away in nineteenth century tomes, gathering dust and almost unread even by homoeopaths. Later we shall see how this has come about, but for the present let us look at what happened to some of these pioneers.

The medicines that were tested fall into three broad categories. Firstly, there are substances that are definitely poisonous if taken in adequate dosage – such things as mercury, phosphorus, and arsenic. Not surprisingly, provers who took these often made themselves quite seriously ill.

Secondly there are substances that, although certainly capable of making people ill, seldom cause death even when taken in fairly large doses. In this second group we find, for example, nutmeg, hashish, and poison ivy.

Thirdly there is a group of substances that would ordinarily be thought of as more or less inert or harmless; here we find common salt, charcoal, and quartz sand. This group offers special difficulties to a modern reader, in that it is particularly difficult to decide to what extent the symptoms attributed to the medicine may really be due to something else.

There is of course a certain amount of overlapping among these categories, but in what follows I shall treat them separately.

1. DANGEROUS POISONS

The nineteenth century homoeopathic literature contains many hair-raising accounts of people taking appallingly large doses of poisonous substances. Hering, for example, took a lead preparation until his moustache and eyebrows

fell out and his teeth decayed. A Dr Spence also took lead in increasing doses over three weeks: his gums became spongy and he suffered other well-known symptoms of lead poisoning such as colicky abdominal pain and paralysis of his limbs. Knowing what we do today about the persistence of lead in the body and its long-term effects, we must assume that these provers would have continued to suffer from lead poisoning long after the end of the experiments.

Another poison that attracted a great deal of attention from provers was phosphorus. This was used at the time in the manufacture of matches and was well known as an industrial poison; workers in the industry suffered loss of teeth and destruction of their jaw bones ('phossy jaw'). Provers who took phosphorus duly suffered pains in their teeth and facial bones. Some of them also experienced interesting psychological symptoms. Dr Heath, an American, took five drops of phosphorus tincture and then dismissed the matter from his mind. At about 10 p.m. he went to bed but was unable to sleep.

My mind was greatly oppressed with melancholy; tears would start without cause; a feeling of dread, as if awaiting something terrible, while unable to resist or move, overcame me. Sometimes it seemed as if I was beginning to bloat, and then I could hear a multitude of voices saying, in high glee, 'Fill him up a little more and he will burst', followed by demoniacal laughter, which made cold chills run over me. Darting, cutting pains gave me much distress, starting from several points and flashing over (my) whole abdomen; I imagined myself an aurora borealis, and seemed to hear distinctly voices shouting 'Beautiful, oh! was not that splendid?' as the pains became more severe and lasting. Soon, however, the agony became so great that it threw off in a measure the stupor that clouded my senses. Springing from bed, I hastily dressed and sat down to collect my scattered thoughts. My fingers were all thumbs; I felt a numbness of the whole body accompanied by sensation as if encompassed by innumerable needles that just touched, and on slightest movement entered, my body. Throat felt dry and parched; a flame seemed passing through me. When I

attempted to walk my legs seemed glued to the floor; the slightest motion caused great pain. With great exertion I reached the vessel. The moment the bowels began to move the pains assumed the form of cramps. The passages were like the scraping of intestines and were almost constant, attended with tenesmus for upwards of two hours, at the end of which I lay down on the bed weak, sore, and almost helpless.

(*Cyclopaedia*, vol. III, p. 568)

It took Heath more than two months to recover fully from this alarming experience.

Sometimes provers took matters to the point where their health was permanently impaired. This occurred during the provings of arsenic in America, in which some of the provers took doses of a tincture of arsenic for long periods—fifty days or more. They experienced a variety of symptoms, and some of these were still present two years later. A Dr King, for example, reported that ‘The action of the drug on the eyes was very marked at the time the proving was made, and the symptoms have since been so persistent that I fear the results are permanent.’ His eyes felt constantly weak; if he looked at anything for a short time it became blurred and indistinct and he was troubled by light. He could not read or write for long and his eyes were easily irritated by wind or cold. He also had persistent bowel symptoms and pains in his legs. Another prover, a Dr Ramage, also had persistent eye symptoms for two years, and even after that he continued to suffer from a recurrent rash, his stomach hurt, and he was noticeably more irritable and less cheerful than he used to be.

2. TOXIC BUT NON-FATAL SUBSTANCES

This group contains some of the most interesting accounts, since the provers often took large doses over long periods. This comes out particularly clearly in the provings of *Thuja occidentalis*, the Tree of Life, in which one hardy experimenter took as much as 42,260 drops of tincture over 155 days; some others took nearly as much. Not surprisingly an enormous variety of symptoms ensued, which it is quite impossible to summarize. A number of provers, including

three children (the apparent willingness of some enthusiasts to experiment on children and even babies is remarkable), developed warts, and in adults a gonorrhoea-like urethritis was also seen; both these features help to explain why *Thuja* was regarded by Hahnemann as the principal 'anti-sycotic' agent. Dr Robert Dudgeon, a prominent English homoeopath of the time, had in this connection an embarrassing experience which I give in his own words.

On 10th July, when taking a walk, I happened to pass an arbor vitae (Tree of Life) laden with green cones. I plucked one, chewed it a little, and thought no more about it. That same evening I observed a very disagreeable scalding on making water, which continued all next day; and I was horrified to observe on undressing that my shirt was spotted all over in a manner extremely repugnant to one's notion of respectability. I found a considerable gleet discharge from the urethra, which was evidently swollen and inflamed, as the stream of urine was small and split, and burning had increased. I had quite forgotten the circumstance of having chewed the *Thuja* cone, and could not imagine what could have produced in me, a decent paterfamilias, such a very incongruous complaint. The following day the discharge had become yellow, while the other symptoms remained as before. I now remembered the cone-chewing, and regarded the malady with more composure. I resolved to take no medicine to interfere with its course. The discharge still continued, though in diminished degree, till the 15th; but the scalding and interrupted stream were by that time gone, and on the 16th I was again quite well. The symptoms while they lasted were precisely those of an ordinary attack of gonorrhoea, but their medicinal origin was evidenced by the short duration of the attack. I should add that two colleagues who, at my suggestion, chewed a cone as I had done, were unaffected by it.

(*Cyclopaedia*, vol. IV, p. 372)

There are no reports of fatalities from accidental overdose with *Thuja*, and from the large doses taken by some of the provers it would not seem to be a dangerous substance. However, the symptoms often lasted a long time, sometimes for a month or more after the last dose was taken.

Another interesting substance is poison ivy (*Rhus*). This

is a plant that grows wild in North America. People become sensitized to it easily and then suffer severe skin reactions whenever they come into contact with it. Hahnemann introduced the herb as a homoeopathic medicine in the *Materia Medica Pura*, and it has always remained an important homoeopathic medicine, being used for the treatment of skin disorders and also certain kinds of muscle and joint pains.

The American provers experimented with *Rhus* quite intensively. For the most part they used extracts of the leaves, either neat or in low dilutions. Most of them experienced the expected skin and muscle symptoms but the details of some of the narratives are curious.

One prover, for example, became so exquisitely sensitive to the plant that in subsequent years he was unable to pass a swamp in which the plant was growing without suffering renewed symptoms. An unusual feature was that at these times his wife would experience vaginal burning after intercourse.

Another prover, a Dr Clary, held a stick of *Rhus* in his hand for half a minute and just touched his tongue with the tip of it. Nothing happened for a week; then while sitting at dinner he suddenly felt a scalding sensation in his tongue, and this rapidly grew worse and spread over his whole mouth and throat. Over the next few days he became very ill; a severe rash spread all over his body, his whole intestinal tract was affected, and his muscles ached so much that he could barely walk. It was more than two weeks before he recovered.

Other drugs in this group include those taken up as psychedelic agents by later generations, such as nutmeg and hashish. Hallucinations and other bizarre mental symptoms are reported surprisingly seldom by provers, who seem mainly concerned with bowel disturbances, aches and pains, and various strange *physical* sensations. (This is true of the vast majority of the proving literature taken as a whole.) Some 'psychedelic' effects are reported, however. One physician, H. C. Wood, who took a 'very

large dose' of hemp grown in Kentucky found himself behaving foolishly. Later he began to experience periods when all connection seemed to be severed between himself and the outer world.

I might be said to have been unconscious during these times, in so far that I was oblivious to all external objects; but on coming out of one, it was not a blank, dreamless void on which I looked back, a mere empty space, but rather a period of active but aimless life. I do not think there was any connected thought in them; they seemed simple wild reveries, without any binding cord – each a mere chaos of disjointed ideas. The mind seemed freed from all its ordinary laws of association, so that it passed from idea to idea, as it were, perfectly at random.

(*Cyclopaedia*, vol. I, p. 709)

Time passed very slowly; the second hand of Wood's watch seemed hardly to move. Then he began to experience a bad trip.

I felt myself mounting upwards, expanding, dilating, dissolving into the wide confines of space, overwhelmed by a horrible, rending, unutterable despair. Then, with tremendous effort, I seemed to shake this off, and to start up with the shuddering thought, Next time you will not be able to throw this off, and what then?

(*Cyclopaedia*, vol. I, p. 710)

Proving of hemp would of course be illegal today.

3. APPARENTLY INERT SUBSTANCES

This group is in some ways the most puzzling to evaluate. It is very difficult to understand how taking common salt or charcoal could produce genuine symptoms, yet these and similar apparently inert substances were extensively proved by the early homoeopaths. According to Hahnemann they would not have had any effect in their crude form but must first be activated by dynamization. Even homoeopaths were sometimes sceptical about this, which makes their eventual conversion through personal experience all the more interesting. A good example is provided by the Austrian provings of common salt.

Some provers were in fact insensitive to salt. Others, however, had well-marked symptoms and there are pages and pages of them. One of the most interesting reports is that of Dr Watzke, who on 2 March 1843 began to take salt in various doses. He ended his proving on 17 April and at first concluded that he had experienced only a few symptoms.

I deceived myself, however. It proved to be more permanent and powerful than I wished. Soon after my last proving there appeared remarkable weakness and prostration of the body. I was not able to make my usual rounds in the suburbs on foot. The painful tension, already noticed in the former experiments, here and there in the joints as if the tendons were too short, or as if I had been struck there, occurred now more frequently. The tensive pain in the groin and popliteal space was sometimes so great that in walking in the street it was with trouble that I could get on for a few minutes.

(*Cyclopaedia*, vol. III, p. 381)

The symptoms continued until the end of May. Reflecting on his experience, Watzke wrote:

It could not be easy for anyone to show themselves less susceptible to small as well as large doses of common salt than I showed myself at the beginning of my experiments. The small doses made no or almost no particular impression; the larger were ejected by the organism in the shortest way and with all possible haste. And yet the medium doses, used continuously for a longer period, developed the salt disease in me almost to complete cachexia; and of all the medicines which I have hitherto proved, none created ultimately such a deep penetrating tenacious action in me as common salt.

(*Cyclopaedia*, vol. III, p. 381n)

This is certainly a curious account, and it does not stand alone; numerous other provers report something similar. Watzke appears to have been a sceptical and objective observer, and it is difficult to dismiss his account as the result of self-deception.

This is not true of all the substances in this group; the provings of several commonly used homoeopathic medicines, such as *Silica*, *Sepia*, and *Lycopodium* (club moss) are

less convincing. A great many symptoms are attributed to these medicines, but they are mostly rather indefinite and I, at least, am left with the suspicion that many of them are really due to suggestion or other factors.

A case in point is provided by a report of the supposed effects of musk. This substance, used in the manufacture of scent, consists of the dried preputial secretions of the musk deer. This unlikely medicine had been proved by Hahnemann as well as other researchers, but the most startling description of effects comes from Hromada and concerns the experiences of an unspecified number of people engaged in grinding (trituration) musk.

A man aged 52 spent an hour at the task. In the first five minutes he had 'a kind of rush of blood to the head, with staring eyes and spasm in his mouth, so that he could not answer when asked what was the matter, though he understood what was said'. He then began to speak, but rapidly and confusedly, and he would not stop when asked. He became pale and sweaty and staggered as if drunk. His eyes rolled upwards, his jaw moved as if chewing, and he was unable to answer questions coherently. All these symptoms disappeared half an hour after he was taken into the fresh air.

Rather surprisingly he then resumed his grinding of musk. All went well for half an hour, but then the symptoms came back with greater force than before. He lost consciousness and suffered a hallucination of big black figures pressing in on him.

Other musk grinders had symptoms that were almost as alarming. One woman aged 45, for example, lost consciousness, but before this happened everything seemed to go round in a circle, at first slowly, then faster and faster until at last it seemed as if she were hovering in the air and then falling from a great height.

It seems surprising to say the least that grinding musk should have had such dramatic effects as these. What was going on? A clue, I think, is provided by the occurrence in one musk-grinder, a woman aged 60, of sexual desire. We

are assured by Hromada that she never in all her life had had such a sensation before, but it is permissible to wonder whether she can have been quite so immune from the desires of the flesh as this.

It seems much more likely to me that many of the symptoms supposedly due to the musk were really caused by a combination of collective hysteria (assuming that these people were all doing their grinding together, which is implied though not stated) and suppressed sexual awareness heightened by knowledge of the origin of musk. The experiences of these people sound remarkably like those of participants in Anton Mesmer's groups. Mesmerism was fashionable at about this time and there are numerous reports of trances with a strong sexual element occurring during Mesmeric sessions.

Support for this idea comes from an interesting case reported by Dudgeon.

An unmarried lady of about 40 mentioned to me that she was extremely sensitive to the odour of musk. She would faint if she merely opened a note highly scented with musk. A doctor who was unaware of this peculiarity prescribed for her a pill containing $\frac{1}{4}$ grain of musk. Soon after taking this she became unconscious, was violently convulsed, and this state lasted nearly a week, with short intervals of consciousness. She said her life was despaired of. (*Cyclopaedia*, Vol. III, p. 320)

Lest it appear that I am being unduly sceptical about some of these provings, let me describe briefly what happened in a modern experiment of this kind, carried out in 1978. The aim was to apply modern statistical methods to the analysis of provings, and the substance chosen for testing was *Pulsatilla* (wind-flower). This is very commonly used in homoeopathy and was extensively proved both by Hahnemann and others.

The proving was carried out with a 3x potency – that is, with a low (10^{-3}) dilution. This was chosen instead of the undiluted tincture because it was the strongest preparation that would not have an identifiable taste or appearance.

The proving was carried out on volunteers in the north-west of England; most were members of a large philosophical society and were interested in homoeopathy, though their actual experience of it varied greatly. The fact that most of the provers knew one another was a disadvantage, but the same was true of most of the nineteenth century provings.

The trial was planned to last three months, with provers taking one tablet twice daily and recording their symptoms in a diary. During the first month *all* the provers received a dummy tablet (placebo); they did not know this, although Dr Clover, who was conducting the trial, did. In the second month half the provers received *Pulsatilla* and half received dummy tablets, while in the third month those who had received dummy tablets now received *Pulsatilla* and vice versa. In the second and third month neither the provers nor Dr Clover knew which provers were receiving *Pulsatilla*, and indeed at this time they did not even know the name of the drug that had been chosen for the trial.

The results were very interesting. Thirty of the fifty-two participants returned their diary sheets filled in to some degree although only eighteen completed the whole three-month trial. There was no evidence that *Pulsatilla* had produced any more symptoms than had the dummy tablets. What was very striking, however, was the fact that much the largest number of symptoms occurred *during the first month* – that is, at the time when *all* the volunteers were taking dummy tablets! The incidence of symptoms declined progressively over the whole three-month period regardless of whether provers were taking *Pulsatilla* or dummy tablets.

This trial does not necessarily show that *Pulsatilla* 3x is incapable of producing symptoms, but in this instance any symptoms it did produce were totally swamped by the enormous number of 'placebo symptoms'. This will not come as any great surprise to orthodox doctors, who are by now well aware of the importance of the 'placebo effect', but it does reinforce the point that the older proving literature has to be viewed with a good deal of caution. To be

sure, the more critical writers of the time, such as Robert Dudgeon and Richard Hughes, recognized this and allowed for it as best they could, but in many cases it is almost impossible to assess the reliability of the reports. This applies particularly to the provings of the relatively inert substances, among which are some of the most widely used homoeopathic medicines.

The fact is that the provings, for all their fundamental importance for homoeopathy, belong to a bygone age. But whatever their shortcomings as scientific descriptions of drug effects they are undoubtedly fascinating historical and human documents. The men and women who conducted these nineteenth century provings believed that they were the pioneers of a coming revolution in medicine – a revolution for which they were willing to risk their health, perhaps even their lives.

As the years went by, however, the mood gradually changed. Provings continued to be carried out into the twentieth century but they were less ambitious in scale and their symptoms were less dramatic. More and more, homoeopaths tended to look for inspiration to the past, as they lost hope of converting the main body of the profession and resigned themselves to the role of a minority elite.