

The mystery of miasms

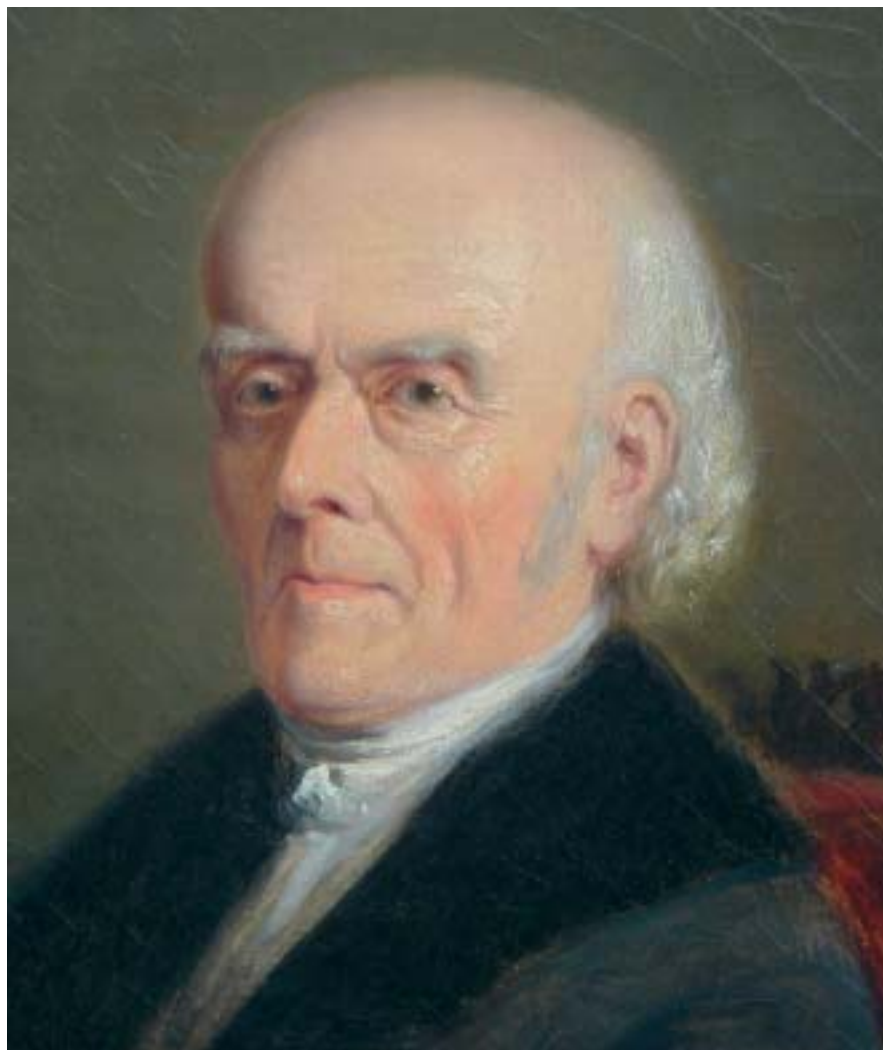
John Saxton explains
a concept of major
influence in
classical homeopathy

Although Hahnemann published many articles and books during his life, two works stand out. The *Organon* describes the principles and practice of homeopathy, and the first edition was published in 1810. As his experience developed he wrote further editions – the sixth, and last, is the most frequently read today. His second great work, *Chronic Diseases; their Peculiar Nature and their Homeopathic Cure*, was first published in 1828, and in it he introduced and explained the theory of miasms. From the start it generated a storm of protest and misunderstanding.

The subject of miasms can be a confusing and daunting one, and some controversy still surrounds it today. However, no one can go far into homeopathic literature without meeting references to it and its terminology, and hence an outline of the main features may be of interest.

My introduction to the subject was not encouraging: a 15 minute review of the subject during my homeopathic training, ending with the opinion that “you don’t need to bother too much about miasms, as they are essentially an historical part of homeopathy’s development; they are not really used today. However, you will come across the terms so you should know something about them.” That was some 25 years ago. Nowadays the whole attitude to miasms has changed, and although there are still some who are not entirely happy about the concept, most embrace the ideas as an extremely important tool in the understanding and treatment of chronic disease.

The theory of miasms serves to explain why some people do not heal with apparently correct remedies, and how



Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843)

Photo: courtesy of British Homeopathic Association

they can be treated more successfully. Hahnemann and his followers discovered that many good results and indeed cures could be obtained using the Law of Similars, but the results were inconsistent. Hahnemann realised that acute diseases responded well, whilst the homeopathic “failures” were in people suffering with chronic disease. The theory that he proposed was to explain this inconsistency and deal efficiently with it.

Definition

In Hahnemann’s time the word “miasm” meant a noxious vapour-causing disease, and it is still defined as such in modern dictionaries. Hahnemann used it in that

sense when expounding his ideas on the causes of cholera. It was some 80 years later that Pasteur and Koch identified bacteria and proposed the Germ Theory, the concept that a bacterium or virus is always the cause of a disease if it is found in association with it: a theory which still governs much of the thinking in orthodox medicine today.

Hahnemann understood that a chronic disease was not merely an illness that had been present for some time. It was a far deeper affliction of the vital force of the body, whose function was to maintain health. Chronic disease could produce different symptoms at different times, but with a common

theme. He termed this effect miasmatic. The true meaning of the Greek verb *miainein*, from which the term miasm is derived, is to pollute; hence the idea he was trying to portray was that the vital force had become distorted, polluted in some way.

Hahnemann identified three influences that were capable of upsetting the functioning of the vital force. These he called “psora”, “sycosis” and “syphilis”, linking them to the three major clinical conditions seen in his day. Hahnemann believed that the distortion of the function of the vital force was the result of incorrect treatment of the illness, rather than the disease per se. Such treatment, emphasising the removal of the external signs of disease by using ointments, cautery and other agents, in fact drove the disease process inwards and turned a straightforward acute condition into a complicated chronic problem.

Psoric miasm

- Key factors – lack of reaction, depletion and deficiency. The structure of the body is sound but the function is disturbed
- Clinical examples – dry, scaly skin rashes, under-activity of the hormones – thyroid deficiency and diabetes mellitus
- Psoric remedies – Sulphur and Graphites

Psora was the first miasm described. The name is derived from the Greek for the “itch”, or “itch disease”. He found there was or had been a skin rash in most cases

of chronic disease. Most of these skin rashes were diagnosed as “scabies”, hence the connection to a named disease.

Hahnemann considered psora to be involved in all disease and at the root of 7/8ths of the conditions being seen. He called it the “hydra-headed monster” as he considered that its manifestations were so widespread.

Nowadays psora is considered to apply to conditions of deficiency or impaired function of the body, where there is no upset to the body’s structure. It is interesting to note that true scabies (a mite infection) is regarded as a sign of immune deficiency by both vets and doctors.

Many cases of dry, irritated skin conditions in both humans and animals are considered to be due to the actions of Psora. Also conditions such as under activity of the thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) or diabetes mellitus (under activity of the insulin producing cells) represent the influence of the psoric miasm.

Sycotic miasm

- Key factors – excessive tissue reactions such as nasal catarrh and warts, excessive tissue growth. An over-reaction of the body to the stimulus
- Clinical examples – tissue overgrowth in arthritis leading to limited movement
- Sycotic remedies – Thuja, Natrum sulphuricum and Nitric acid

Sycosis was the second miasm described. The name comes from two Greek words, *sukon* meaning a fig and *osis* meaning to form. Fig-like warts appear in gonorrhoea, another major disease of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Hahnemann linked the sycotic miasm to incorrectly treated gonorrhoea.

The incidence of gonorrhoea varied considerably during Hahnemann’s life, very much linked to the movements of the armies that were active in Europe at that time, and by implication the activities of the camp followers. Hahnemann considered the peak of its activity was from 1809-1814, the period when some of the major battles of the Napoleonic wars were fought in and around what is now Germany. After the main theatre of war moved away, the incidence of gonorrhoea declined in Germany. This observation caused Hahnemann to consider sycosis as the least important of the miasms. This is another example of his thinking being influenced by the clinical realities of his time, and his emphasis on close observation. Today sycosis is thought to be a significant element in many of the diseases that are on the increase, such as cancer and arthritis.

Sycosis implies excessive tissue reaction and unnecessary growth of new tissue. Warts and catarrh are two common features, and many cases of arthritis where new bone is laid down around joints, thus limiting their movement, involve its influence.

Syphilitic miasm

- Key factors – destruction
- Clinical examples – ulceration
- Syphilitic remedies – Mercury and Aurum metallicum

The final member of the triad was syphilis which Hahnemann linked to the venereal disease of the same name. There was much debate in Hahnemann’s time as to whether there were one or two venereal diseases. Hahnemann correctly considered gonorrhoea and syphilis to be separate diseases. Many other eminent people of the time thought they were different phases of the same condition. The problem was that the diseases often co-existed. Initially the patient appeared to suffer with gonorrhoea, but later on the signs of advanced syphilis manifested. John Hunter, the father of English surgery, was so convinced they were one condition that he deliberately infected himself to prove



Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

Napoleon (1769-1821) Visiting a Bivouac on the Eve of the Battle of Austerlitz, 1st December 1805, 1808 (oil on canvas), Lejeune, Louis (1775-1848)/Chateau de Versailles, France

the disease could be easily treated. That was his great tragedy, for when he realised his error, syphilis was well established and killing him.

Hahnemann considered that primary syphilis was one of the easiest conditions to cure, with Mercury being homeopathic for it. However, in his time mercury was used in dangerously high doses by the orthodox doctors leading to the later stages of syphilis being commonly seen.

It is the destructive effects of the advanced disease that form the picture of the miasm as it is understood today. Collapse and destruction comprise its core. Its name also comes from the Greek – *siphilos*, to cripple or maim. It is nature's self destruct button. Cancer involves the presence of the syphilitic miasm.

Nowadays the Cancer and Tubercular miasms are frequently diagnosed by homeopaths. This implies a clinical picture and behaviour pattern suggestive of the condition, *not* necessarily the presence of the clinical condition. It is important to clarify this point. These and other proposed newer miasms are in fact combinations of Hahnemann's original triad, and represent in particular forms, the three basic ways in which the body can function.

New perspectives

Fortunately major epidemics of acute killer diseases such as smallpox are largely a thing of the past, despite warnings about pandemics such as bird flu. However, the western world is now in the grip of an epidemic of chronic disease that makes the Black Death look like a minor inconvenience. Asthma, arthritis, AIDS and cancer are the new epidemic diseases. Millions of pounds and hours of research are invested in these conditions. It seems that either a new "cause" or "cure" is announced regularly for one disease or another.

Homeopathy provides new perspectives to the problem of chronic disease, and miasms are at the core of that view. The conventional approach to disease reduces everything to a series of well-defined entities which are then dealt with individually. Despite the fact that the various systems of the body interrelate, the orthodox view is of separate individual units impinging on each other, rather than the homeopathic idea of one entity functioning as a whole. A patient may have been diagnosed conventionally, over time, as suffering from arthritis (skeletal system), colitis (alimentary



Photo courtesy of Tim Robinson

The concept of miasms enhances the treatment of chronic disease

system) and eczema (skin "system"), and treated for each individually. The homeopathic view is that these so-called separate conditions reflect a common miasmatic tendency – a weak point in the functioning of the body.

In the example above the predominant trait in all the apparently separate conditions is one of excessive reactions, namely thickening around joints, urgency of motions with diarrhoea and inflammation of the skin. Here the sycotic miasm must be correctly treated if true healing of the whole is to occur.

In chronic disease, the symptom picture presented at any one time is often only a part of the overall imbalance in the patient. The matching remedy for those symptoms alone may not be the matching remedy for the whole picture of the disease unless the underlying pattern of imbalance is recognised and corrected.

Homeopaths use the miasmatic theory mainly in one of two ways. Either they can prescribe remedies which match the symptoms relating to the one miasm

that predominates in a case, or they can use remedies derived from diseased tissue – nosodes – to counteract the influence of that miasm. In the above example, a strongly sycotic remedy such as *Thuja occidentalis* may effect a cure, or another strongly anti sycotic remedy may be indicated.

From my somewhat discouraging introduction to miasms I have come to value the new dimension that they give to the understanding of chronic disease in general and the specific appreciation of what is happening in a particular case. The concept applies to animals just as much as to humans.

Acute and first aid prescribing do not need to take undue notice of the concept of miasms. Indeed, the powerful and deep acting remedies, particularly the nosodes, used in miasmatic prescribing should only be used by someone with the appropriate level of training. Using the concept of miasms enhances the successful treatment of chronic disease. I for one would not like to be without it as a tool.

John Saxton B Vet Med Vet FF Hom Cert IAVH MRCVS has been using homeopathy for just over 25 years. He currently runs a homeopathic referral practice near Leeds, as well as lecturing both at home and abroad for the Homeopathic Professionals Teaching Group. His book, *Miasms as Practical Tools*, has just been published and is available from the BHA book service.