Reviewer’s report

Title: Homeopathic Medical Practice: Long-term results of a Cohort Study with 3981 Patients

Version: 1 Date: 8 June 2005

Reviewer: Harald Walach

Reviewer’s report:

General

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Major Compulsory Revisions: None.
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Minor Essential Revisions: None
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Discretionary Revisions:

This paper describes a very carefully planned and carried out study that documents a large cohort of patients treated homeopathically with a long follow-up and a very high follow-up rate. This in itself is a great achievement and an important contribution to public health research and thus should be published. The manuscript itself is in very good shape and only a few minor changes should be incorporated. My suggestion is that I pass on those changes to the authors themselves since this is an open peer-review process.

There is not much to criticise or to comment on in the way the paper is presented and the data are given. There is one omission on p. 8, where the reference Hannan 1994 should be given in the reference section.

Also, the study claims to be the first to evaluate systematically the range of diagnosis and therapies in homeopathic medical practices in Germany and Switzerland. This sentence should be qualified by classical because there have been other studies documenting diagnosis and therapies.

The authors did not find significant differences for the children measured by the Kindl Quality of Life questionnaire and attribute this to the lack of sensitivity to change of this instrument. While this might be true, it could simply be due to the fact that this generic instrument for children is not really a good one, and also many other studies have difficulties documenting obviously happening quality of life improvements by using such questionnaires. Thus, the difficulty they have encountered is quite a generic one and due to a mix of factors, only one of them being the lack of responsivity of the instrument. Other factors are that children adapt much quicker to perceived quality of life and thus it is a major methodological problem. The authors might want to add a sentence to clarify this.

The chart of presenting major diagnoses in figure 2 is only partially helpful, because it lets the reader with figuring out the precise percentages. I suggest two solutions to this problem: either the percentages are indicated next to the bar or else separate pie charts with precise percentages could be presented.

Another suggestion for improvement would be that the authors give in a few sentences some background to the modelling they have used for presenting their data. Not all readers will be familiar
with the quite sophisticated regression models they have used and explaining the reasons and the background at least to some of the steps they have taken will help potential readers to understand that this technique is highly sophisticated in isolating true treatment effects as compared to time trends. This could either happen in the statistics method section or else they might want to add a few sentences in the discussion. I know that they have included in the discussion that the amount of change they have seen is larger than is expected by regression to the mean. However, I feel that unless base restrictions prohibit this a small paragraph clarifying this in plain language in the statistics section would help to convince sceptical readers that this method of analysis is both sensible, robust and state of the art.

To sum up: This is a high-quality study with an exceptionally high turnout rate of follow-up and thus has a very solid database for drawing the conclusions that are being drawn. It would be wise to not temper with the very clear-cut analysis and data presentation of this study, and it would be even advisable to underscore this fact in an appropriate place in the manuscript. Since none of the suggested changes are dramatic or changing the outlook and the conclusion of the manuscript in any way I suggest that the authors can be trusted to include whatever changes they feel are necessary.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No