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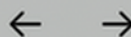
Homeopathy Doesn't Work. So Why Do So Many Germans Believe in It?

How Natalie Grams, who once abandoned her medical education to study alternative therapies, became Germany's most prominent homeopathy skeptic.



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Behind an arched stone facade in Heidelberg, Germany, [Natalie Grams](#) spent years welcoming patients into bright rooms with plastered white walls and hardwood floors. As a homeopathic physician, she listened to their concerns and prescribed tinctures, ointments, and little white pills for their ailments. People trusted her, and Grams was certain that these nontraditional treatments (echinacea for colds; arnica for muscle pain) made them better.

For her, homeopathy was more than a profession. It was something she accepted on faith and an essential part of her identity. She treated herself homeopathically and her young family, too. “I was convinced that homeopathy could heal everything, really everything,” Grams says.

Then one day in 2013 at a nearby lake, Grams fell violently ill with a viral infection. Under different circumstances, she might have turned to a tincture or those little pills, which homeopaths call globules. But there was no time. Her fever was spiking, and her sense of reality was fading away. Her family called an ambulance. Bumping along the potholed country road, the medics tried to distract Grams by inquiring about her work. When she said she was a physician, they asked what field of medicine. Vulnerable and scared, she couldn’t bring herself to tell them. These are real doctors, she thought. They save lives. They were saving her life. She couldn’t do what they did. What, then, did that make her? So she lied and said she was a general practitioner.

It would be a few more years before Grams fully turned her back on homeopathy—becoming, practically overnight, Germany’s most prominent skeptic of the practice. But that afternoon in the ambulance, she began to question her devotion. “I was, somehow, for the first time, not sure whether it was a good thing to be a homeopath,” she recalls.

The pseudoscience of homeopathy was invented in Germany in the 18th century by a maverick physician named Samuel Hahnemann. His theory was based on the ancient principle of like cures like—akin to the mechanism behind vaccines. The remedies Hahnemann developed, meant to help the body heal on its own, originate as substances that with excess exposure (like pollen) can make a patient ill (in this case, with hay fever)—or kill them: Arsenic is used as a treatment for digestive problems, and the poisonous plant belladonna is meant to counteract pain and swelling. These substances are diluted—again and again—and shaken vigorously in a process called “potentization” or “dynamization.” The resultant remedies typically contain a billionth, trillionth, or... well...a zillionth (10 to the minus 60th, if you’re counting) of the original substance.



▲ Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) was a German physician, known for creating an alternative form of medicine called homeopathy. Photographer: stocksnapper/Getty Images

Today, homeopathy is practiced worldwide, particularly in Britain, India, the U.S.—where there’s a monument to Hahnemann on a traffic circle six blocks north of the White House—and, especially, Germany. Practitioners, however, differ greatly in their approach. Some only prescribe remedies cataloged in homeopathic reference books. Others take a more metaphoric bent, offering treatments that contain a fragment of the Berlin Wall to cure feelings of exclusion and loneliness or a powder exposed to cellphone signals as protection from radiation emitted by mobile handsets.

Grams, the daughter of a chemist, first turned to homeopathy in 2002. While she was attending medical school to become a surgeon, a highway accident left her car in the ditch with the windshield shattered. Grams walked away unhurt, but she soon began to suffer from heart palpitations, panic attacks, and fainting spells that doctors couldn’t explain. Her roommate suggested she visit a *heilpraktiker*, a type of German naturopath that offers alternative therapies ranging from acupuncture and massage to reiki and homeopathy.

Homeopaths typically spend a lot of time with patients, asking not just about symptoms but also about emotions, work, and relationships. This is all meant to find the root cause of a patient's suffering and is part of its appeal. The heilpraktiker asked Grams about her feelings and the accident, things she hadn't spoken about with her doctors—or anyone—thinking they weren't important in understanding what was wrong. The heilpraktiker prescribed her belladonna globules and recommended she visit a trauma therapist. Steadily, her symptoms fell away. She was healed.

Soon after, Grams dropped the idea of becoming a surgeon, opting for a future as a general practitioner while taking night courses in alternative therapies. After completing her medical degree, she began a five-year residency to qualify as a GP. But three years in, Grams abandoned conventional medicine and began an apprenticeship with a homeopath near Heidelberg.

Homeopathy is a multibillion-dollar global industry with hundreds of tincture and globule makers, led by France's Boiron SA, which reported sales topping \$600 million in 2020. German manufacturers had combined revenue approaching \$750 million last year, according to researcher IQVIA Inc. The bulk of that was via direct sales to consumers, as the vast majority of homeopathic products are widely available without a prescription. Roughly half of Germany's population has used homeopathic preparations, and about 70% of those say they're satisfied with the treatment.

The Nazis embraced homeopathy as part of their darkly motivated pursuit of a robust German Volk. A homeopath was chosen to lead the working group for the Nazi party's health policy concept, *Neue Deutsche Heilkunde* (*New German Medicine*), and in 1937 Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess addressed the 12th International Homeopathic Congress in Berlin. After the war, homeopathy was torn between a supportive West and a disapproving East, but it enjoyed a renaissance in the 1970s as it captured the imagination of anti-establishment youth.

In 1978 the German parliament, under pressure from industry lobbyists, exempted homeopathic remedies from the barrage of tests required to approve drugs for medical use. If, the act states, homeopathic doctors claim that remedies work, that alone is proof of their efficacy under German law. Under this ruling, all homeopathic remedies are considered, by "internal consensus," to have an effect beyond placebo.

Germany's public health insurance providers reimburse some costs of homeopathic treatment, and more than 7,000 of the country's 150,000 doctors specialize in the practice. Nonmedical professionals such as heilpraktikers can also prescribe remedies after passing an examination, and it's not uncommon for German M.D.s to suggest homeopathic concoctions such as tincture of mercury and dandelion globules alongside more conventional medicines.

During the coronavirus pandemic, this quirk of the German medical system made headlines. In January [the press](#) learned that a branch of Charité, Berlin's top hospital, had given Covid-19 patients treatments derived from the remnants of meteorites. "We've seen good progress, that this helps some people," says the hospital's director, Harald Matthes. "Sometimes it didn't do anything at all, and in those cases we stopped using it immediately. We are not dogmatic."

In April 2020 the German branch of the Hahnemann Association, a global group that promotes homeopathy, published an article claiming that the first seven days of a Covid-19 infection could be treated homeopathically—without specifying any particular remedies. By December, when Germany's transmission rate was soaring and ICU patients numbered in the thousands, the group declared that masks were no longer necessary, that vaccines are worse than the virus, and that homeopaths should work in intensive-care units.

Homeopathic success stories frequently start the way Grams's did—with the feeling that conventional medicine has fallen short. Comment sections under articles on the subject are full of feelings of hope and stories of miracles and salvation. The world can feel so much

brighter when, even for an instant, you believe in something close to magic.

In her work, Grams frequently witnessed such miracles. So she was happy to participate when a pair of journalists approached her in 2011 while researching a book about homeopathy. When asked how much she believed in the practice on a scale from 1 to 100, Grams answered, without hesitation, 100. And when the book was published in late 2012, she was eager to read it.

But the critical tone of the book, *Die Homöopathie-Lüge (The Homeopathic Lie)*, dismayed her. Her first response was to fight back; she wanted to make readers see the light. Grams debated commenters online, but few wanted to listen. So she decided to write a book of her own: a well-researched, well-argued defense—“the ‘truth’ about homeopathy.”

Grams consulted chemists and physicists. She read books on behavioral science and decision-making. She parsed clinical trials and homeopathic texts. “I wanted to use everything I could find to defend homeopathy,” she recalls. But as she dove deeper, her line of questioning changed. “I was more and more interested in, ‘How can that be? Is it a psychological phenomenon, is it placebo, is it something that goes beyond chemistry or natural science?’”

One of the few points of agreement between advocates and skeptics of homeopathy is that the remedies contain a chemically insignificant amount of the original substances. As cognitive psychologist Bruce Hood puts it in *The Science of Superstition*, you would need to drink more than 6,600 gallons of the solution to get a single molecule of the original substance. Or as physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes quipped in his 1842 work, *Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions*, “the waters of ten thousand Adriatic seas.”

Where the two camps diverge is why patients who take these remedies often feel relief. Some advocates lean on Hahnemann’s theory that the dilution “imprints” a chemical memory on a substance—he called it a “spiritlike medicinal power”—while others say we lack the capability to understand or test the mechanisms. Skeptics counter that any good the practice might do boils down to the benefits of talk therapy and a simple belief that the treatments are effective.

In 2015 the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council published a meta-analysis of almost 200 studies on homeopathy, seeking evidence that the practice worked beyond the placebo effect. It didn’t find any. In 2017 a British group updated the report and came to the same conclusion, recommending that physicians stop providing homeopathic remedies. The National Health Service soon pulled the plug on most funding for such treatments, even though the royal family frequently consults homeopathic doctors and a company owned by Prince Charles has sold a homeopathic tincture made from artichokes and dandelions.

Grams abandoned her practice shortly before she finished *Homeopathy Reconsidered: What Really Helps Patients*. Prescribing remedies she no longer believed were efficacious had become an ethical strain, and she knew the book would be challenging for her patients and fellow homeopaths.

Homeopathy Reconsidered made Grams a media star. Until she came along, Germany’s most visible skeptics of homeopathy had tended to be stern-looking men, lifelong critics in their 60s and 70s. Grams was young—36 when the book came out in 2015—attractive, and a very recent convert. She’s been featured in German newspapers and magazines and has become a frequent guest lecturer at universities, hospitals, and pharmacist association meetings. On Twitter, she offers her 48,000 followers a steady diet of criticism of homeopathy and advocacy of Covid-19 vaccines. Opponents paint her as a media pawn and a puppet of Big Pharma. She has been called all manner of offensive names—and received death threats, spurring Grams to ask her local municipality to shield her address from the public record.



▲ Grams Photographer: Maximilian Mann for Bloomberg Businessweek

In May 2019 a reporter from a German newspaper asked her, point blank, if homeopathic remedies work. Grams's response: "Not beyond the placebo effect." After the interview was published, she received a letter from German homeopathic manufacturer Hevert Pharmaceuticals LLC ordering her not to repeat those words or risk being fined €5,100 (\$5,900) per utterance.

Although numerous studies have shown Grams's statement to be true, her lawyers told her that under the 1978 "internal consensus" law she risked being sued. Yet Grams refused to comply. Instead, she took to Twitter, posting a photo of the letter under the *Game of Thrones*-inspired caption "What do we say when #homeopathy-pharma tries to silence us? Not today." The post gained thousands of retweets and likes, and the incident was broadly publicized—even garnering a segment on a popular German talk show. If Hevert had been trying to quiet public skepticism about homeopathy, the plan spectacularly backfired. Grams has since made the assertion multiple times; she has yet to hear from Hevert.

As Grams has stepped up her criticism, homeopathy has suffered, even in Germany. Since 2016 the volume of homeopathic products sold has fallen 12%, to 48 million packages last year. In 2019 the medical association in the northern city of Bremen banned medical professionals from seeking further education in homeopathy, effectively barring doctors from getting homeopathic certification. At least nine other German states have since followed suit.

Still, Grams says that as long as homeopathy is treated as a complementary option—and not a replacement for conventional treatments—there’s little need to prohibit it. She and other skeptics recommend following the strategy of the U.K. and France, where public-health systems no longer pay for it. The German government, though, has been reluctant to take this step. In 2019, Health Minister Jens Spahn said the public-health system spends only €20 million a year on homeopathic remedies—or roughly 0.05% of the system’s budget for drugs. “I simply decided it’s OK the way we’ve got it,” Spahn told German public television.

Today, Grams works with nonprofits that promote a rigorous examination of homeopathy and other fields of dubious scientific merit. In February 2020 she published a second book, *What Really Works: A Compass Through the World of Gentle Medicine*, a bestseller that evaluates alternative therapies. And this year, a German foundation awarded Grams a €20,000 prize for her willingness to stand up to pressure.

But through it all, she has missed working with patients—even if she now feels the treatments she prescribed were ineffective. So a few years ago she started looking for a clinic or a practice that would let her finish her medical residency and finally become a licensed general practitioner. “Nobody wanted me,” she says. “Perhaps some people were afraid that the hate I got would be channeled through me into their work.” The rejections piled up, and she eventually stopped trying.

Lately, Grams has lowered her public profile and makes headlines less often. She hosts a biweekly podcast, *Grams’ Sprechstunde (Consultation Hour)*, where she’s discussed everything from childhood medicine to nursing home scandals and has interviewed mindfulness coaches, vaccination advocates, and palliative-care specialists. She gets less hate mail, and while at first she was terrified to speak without a script on her podcast—for fear of retribution, legal or otherwise—she’s now more relaxed. “I like being an activist,” she says. “It’s a lot of hate, but it’s really fun.” —*With Stefan Nicola*

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