

MP's prescription for cutting NHS bill

Cambridge MP Julian Huppert has been branded "illiberal" by a Tory MP for calling for an end to NHS funding for homeopathic medicine. JACK GROVE reports.

HE has only been in House of Commons for two months, but it seems Julian Huppert has already ruffled a few feathers. After asking three pointed questions about the funding of homeopathy by the NHS, he was denounced by Conservative MP David Tredinnick for his "illiberal views" on the alternative medicine. It follows a spat between the two MPs, which began when Mr Huppert criticised an Early Day Motion laid down by Mr Tredinnick supporting the use of homeopathy for certain types of cancer. The clash has reignited arguments over the public funding of homeopathy.

A report by the House of Commons science and technology committee this year concluded that the NHS should "cease to fund homeopathy" because there was little scientific evidence to prove its effectiveness. That is a view that Mr Huppert, a Cambridge-educated dentist, agrees with. "There is no reliable evidence for homeopathy having any effect above placebo – which makes sense, because most

homeopathic 'remedies' are nothing more than sugar pills," he said.

"I have no problem with such items being available for members of the public to purchase with their own money, subject to the rules of trading standards and so forth.

"However, I do not think it is right for the NHS to spend millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on this. We currently pay for four 'homeopathic hospitals' as well as the treatments.

"I think this is wrong in principle, but particularly so given the financial constraints we face."

Homeopathist Thierry Clerc, based at The Therapy Room in Oxford Road, Cambridge, said people should have an open mind.

He said: "I'm from France and was quite shocked by the comments of the scientific community when I moved to England.

"In France, homeopathy is very big and is used by about half of the population at times. People accept its use much more.

"Some may question the fact homeopathic remedies are so dilute, but this is a misunderstanding of the healing process.

Homeopathy helps to stimulate the body to heal itself.

"In very low doses, it actually works better because the dose is less toxic. There are many studies that show that ultra-dilution works.

"Perhaps we don't know exactly why it works, but it is effective.

"It's a bit like radiation in the 1800s. People couldn't explain exactly what was happening, but they knew it was effective – it's the same with homeopathy.

"I was inspired to become a homeopathist because of my own experience. I was diagnosed with severe arthritis and told I'd be in a wheelchair by the age of 40.

"Thanks to homeopathy, I'm healthier than ever and have run marathons in the past few years."

Dr Chester White, a long-standing GP based in Cambridge, also felt medics should not dismiss homeopathy so lightly.

He said: "Julian is a very tightly disciplined scientist and I can see why he wouldn't have any time for homeopathy.

"But when I was being trained, we were told to take account of all forms of alternative medicine and I still subscribe to that.

"If nothing else, the placebo effect can help patients. Even the mere routine of treatment can have some benefit for some patients.

"It does seem to work with some patients, so I think we should an open mind on this issue."

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Facts about alternative treatment

■ Homeopathy's roots emerge from the findings of German-born Dr Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) after he became disillusioned with medical practices of the day such as purging, bloodletting, and the use of toxic chemicals.

He experimented on himself in an attempt to stimulate the body to self heal, establishing a set of principles in the Organon of Medicine.

■ The first homeopathic medical school, The Homeopathic Medical College of Pennsylvania, run by Hahnemann's former pupils, opened in 1834 and still offers treatment today.

■ During the Second World War the British Government tested the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies against diluted mustard gas burns on volunteers.

■ Today there are 400 GPs and four NHS hospitals that offer homeopathic treatment in the UK; in Bristol, London, Liverpool and Glasgow.

The largest, The Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, treats 2,000 people a week with more than 4,000 homeopathic remedies.

