

When Muscles, Bones, and Joints Go Out of Whack

What to do? Classical homeopaths take a holistic approach

by AMY ROTHENBERG ND, DHANP

I RECENTLY VIEWED THE IMAX MOVIE *WIRED TO WIN: SURVIVING the Tour de France*, an incredible feat of filmmaking that brings the human body into larger-than-life focus as it explores the interwoven anatomical and physiological precision required of riders in this demanding bicycle race. Using live-action footage and computerized medical imagery, the film examines concepts like endurance, graphically demonstrating how each person's brain responds to challenges.



Although I had the good fortune to study anatomy and physiology in depth in medical school (including lab work on a cadaver), I found this film to be an eye-opener. It brought to life the mechanical and chemical miracles at play in even the “average” human in a most amazing way—how we take for granted when everything is working smoothly and how crazy-making it can be when things break down.

When things go out of whack

Patients come to see me for many reasons, but as my clientele ages, I see more and more people with orthopedic complaints. The natural process of aging surely accounts for some of these problems, but others are the result of all the exercising

baby-boomers are doing—in attempts to side-step that very aging process!

Many people come to me because they're not getting the results they seek from over-the-counter or prescription drugs, or because the drugs are causing intolerable side-effects. Others worry that the medications may be addressing their pain, but that underlying joint degeneration and chronic inflammation are not being considered. More recently, patients seek alternatives in light of frightening news about some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. “Can homeopathy offer me anything?” they ask. After twenty years of practice, I am happy to answer *yes*, and to share some thoughts with you about the homeopathic treatment of orthopedic complaints.

Like many classical homeopaths, I have treated a wide range of musculoskeletal complaints including: arthritis of the hands, wrists, shoulders, hips, and knees (April '05 *Homeopathy Today*); costochondritis (January '04 *HT*); bunions (Nov '00 *HT*); plantar fasciitis; stiff neck; carpal tunnel syndrome; back pain; and garden variety sports injuries (Sept '04 *HT*) like dislocating shoulders, sprained ankles, muscle cramps, shin splints, and overuse syndromes. I also see patients who have orthopedic issues as part and parcel of more serious systemic disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.

The forest, not just the trees

How do I treat patients with orthopedic problems? In just the same way that I treat

patients with other kinds of complaints! I always look at the presenting issues in the context of the whole person. Not everyone with a sprained ankle needs *Arnica* and not everyone with back pain needs *Rhus toxicodendron*. The beauty of homeopathy is that we can individualize the treatment to the person, thereby getting better results.

Many turn away from homeopathy when it fails them, and it often fails them because they've chosen remedies in a cookbook fashion, based on scant few symptoms and not on the totality of the person with the complaint. Harder to prescribe this way? Possibly. More difficult to teach this approach? Certainly. More consistently effective? Absolutely!

So, if you have the opportunity to help someone with what seems like a simple, straightforward musculoskeletal issue, don't shy away. Just remember: it is a complaint like any other, and it needs to be seen in the context of the whole patient. You need to do a simple review of systems (e.g., digestion, sleep, skin, mental/emotional sphere, etc.) to see if anything else has changed since the injury or illness. In this way, you are offering the best possible homeopathic care that lives up to the promise and elegance of homeopathy and takes the whole person into consideration.

Is it acute or chronic?

Patients with orthopedic complaints often appear to be suffering from an acute problem, so our first job is to decide whether the complaint is truly acute or whether it's a manifestation of more chronic illness. If the patient has benefited from a particular constitutional remedy in the past, if the new symptoms are known to be helped by that remedy (based on remedy provings/clinical indications), and if the patient's physical general symptoms (e.g., body temperature, food cravings and aversions, thirst, sleep position, temperament, etc.) have not changed—then the person most likely needs a dose of their constitutional remedy. This can be true even if they have never had this complaint before.

For instance, I treat Annette, a lovely woman in her 70s, who has done well over the past decade with the constitutional remedy *Lycopodium* for the treatment of anxiety, irritability, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Some years into our work together, Annette began to complain of arthritic hands, and pain and stiffness

in her wrists. Her IBS and her moods were now much improved, but this new symptom had arisen. I did a review of systems and of her physical general symptoms: Annette appeared to be the same as ever—still chilly, still preferring to sleep on her right side, still craving sweets, and still irritable if hungry or contradicted. She had no additional new symptoms.

I gave Annette another dose of *Lycopodium* to address her hand and wrist problems. It reduced the swelling and inflammation and enabled her to pick up where she had left off with several knitting and quilting projects—and to avoid using over-the-counter pain medicines. Just because Annette's hand and wrist symptoms were new, it did not necessarily mean that she needed a new remedy.

Plantar fasciitis case

Another patient, 40-year-old Renee, came to see me for the first time complaining of plantar fasciitis, an incapacitating pain in the bottom of her left heel that made walking difficult and exercise impossible. This was wreaking havoc with her active lifestyle, her work as a nurse, and her ability to run her household with three school-aged children. Upon taking her full case, I learned that Renee had other problems with inflammation, such as inflamed cold sores and sinus infections each winter. A sensitive and hard-working woman, loyal and caring to her husband and long-time friends, Renee also suffered from premenstrual migraines that sent her looking for her dark, quiet bedroom. These symptoms were consistent with indications for the homeopathic remedy *Natrum muriaticum*.

When I prescribed one dose of *Natrum muriaticum* 200c to treat Annette's fasciitis, the medical student sitting in with me that day asked why I had not chosen a remedy more specific to foot pain, as that was what was most limiting to Renee. I told him that I always prefer to give a broader, more holistically prescribed remedy if I can find one. Had this prescription *not* worked, I would have turned to remedies with a smaller sphere of influence that specifically address this type of pain, like *Ruta* or *Rhus toxicodendron*. Happily, over the course of a few months and with one more dose of *Natrum muriaticum* 200c, Renee's plantar fasciitis resolved—as did her migraine headaches. She has also had fewer sinus infections over the past several years.

Not his usual self

Sometimes patients have true acute orthopedic problems that call for an acute homeopathic remedy. Jerry, a 45-year-old pianist, had been my patient off and on for more than a decade. I had successfully treated him for chronic prostatitis, hay fever, and skin problems with *Staphysagria* and more recently with *Pulsatilla*. He came to see me one day, bent over, unable to walk upright because of pain in his back. Out working in the garden the previous day, Jerry had noted nothing unusual—but the next morning he awakened unable to straighten up. He felt worse when he tried to move or take a deep breath.

I noticed that Jerry was decidedly curt with my receptionist and seemed impatient with me—a dramatic shift from his more easygoing (i.e., *Pulsatilla*) self. He also had changed from his generally thirstless nature to drinking incessantly throughout our interview. Because of this, I knew immediately that he had shifted from needing his constitutional remedy to needing a different, acute remedy, even though *Pulsatilla* certainly can be considered in treating backaches.

Once I determined that Jerry's lung sounds were normal, I gave him a dose of *Bryonia* 200c, a common acute remedy for back pain, when the pain is worse with motion, especially in a person who is irritable and dry (e.g., dry lips, constipated, and thirsty, all of which described Jerry to a T). Jerry called the next day to say he was much improved. Two days later, his back was back to normal. It is by locating the problem within the context of the individual that we are better able to prescribe accurately and with confidence. (Jerry did revert back to his *Pulsatilla* state, a remedy I did not repeat routinely at that time, but rather some months later, when some of his more chronic issues began to resurface.)

Aiming at a deeper level

Over the years, I've noticed that people who need certain constitutional remedies tend to develop acute illnesses that respond to related remedies. For example, *Calcarea carbonica* types may develop acute problems that respond to *Rhus toxicodendron*. *Natrum muriaticum* constitutional types tend to develop acute problems that respond to *Bryonia*. Many other such relationships between remedies are noted in the homeopathic literature. If a person is

given a dose of their indicated constitutional remedy, however, it can actually help shift them away from the tendency to get these acute problems in the first place.

For example, I often see people who have been self-treating their musculoskeletal problem with *Rhus tox* or *Bryonia* for years. Their sciatica or bursitis flares up periodically, they take their acute remedy, and the pain and inflammation go away in short order. They swear by their homeopathic acute remedy and wouldn't be without it. When they come to see me for treatment of a different complaint (e.g., constipation or sinusitis) and I give them their constitutional remedy, they are surprised to find their sciatica or bursitis attacks occurring much less frequently or disappearing altogether. By my aiming at a deeper level and prescribing a widely-acting, constitutional remedy vs. an acute, more narrowly-focused remedy, these patients get long-term relief.

Awakened in the night

I will leave you with one last vignette. I was in a deep sleep one night many years ago, and my three, then-small children were tucked in and dreaming. My husband was out of town, teaching overseas. In the wee

hours of the morning, I was awakened by the distinctive sound of my front door creaking open. Heart throbbing, I grabbed my robe and a baseball bat as I headed downstairs to defend my offspring. "Amy?" I heard a voice say. "It's me, John." A dear friend had let himself in, carrying his eight-year-old son who was having trouble breathing. I put down the baseball bat and asked what was going on. "I know we should have gone to the emergency room," explained John, "but Robbie didn't want to go, he wanted to see if you could help first." Great, I was thinking, the kid can barely breathe, it's three in the morning, and here we are in my living room, all of us bleary-eyed. I ran for my stethoscope and, hearing good lung sounds, I happened to feel Robbie's spine as I was listening. Seemed a thoracic rib was way out of alignment. I asked Robbie to lie on the rug and did a simple adjustment to his back. Robbie sat up, took

a deep breath, and said, "Oh, that's *much* better!" He was asleep in his father's arms before they reached their car.

The moral of the story: A mechanical problem often needs a mechanical solution! It would be hard to imagine that even the perfectly prescribed homeopathic remedy would have relieved Robbie in this way.

Just what the doctor ordered

That sort of story aside, with orthopedic issues, homeopathy can be applied just as it is applied in all cases—prescribed for the suffering individual, based on how the symptoms fit into the overall context of the patient. Determine if the problem is acute or chronic in nature; if it's the latter, remember that the constitutional remedy often will be just what the doctor ordered.

And go see that IMAX movie if it comes to a theater near you. You won't be disappointed!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

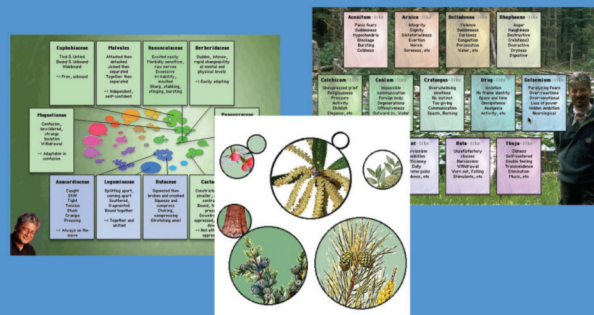
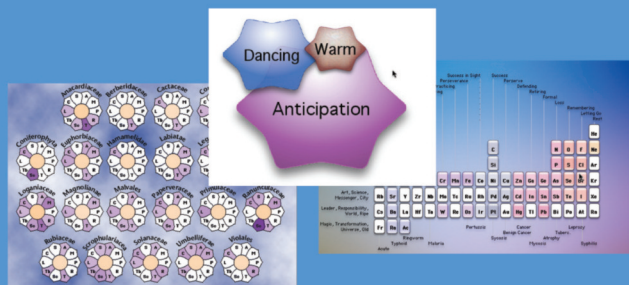
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