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An online survey based on homoeopathy as prophylactic for influenza (Flu) like illness

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Abstract

Background: The homoeopathic prophylaxis (homeoprophylaxis) had been used in prevention of epidemic diseases and had been applied for more than 200 years to various diseases in different parts of the world. A survey has been undertaken to primarily assess the effects of homoeopathic medicine as prophylactic in Influenza like illness.

Objective: The objective of this study was to identify the effects of homoeopathic prophylaxis against flu like symptoms and to identify the most commonly used medicine for homeoprophylaxis.

Methods: An online cross-sectional survey was conducted in the midst of the pandemic (27th April 2020 to 3rd May 2020) in Uttar Pradesh, India. A pilot-tested, self-administered questionnaire consisting of 22 questions was used for this survey.

Results: A total of 347 responses were received on closing of survey. Out of these, 233 received homoeopathic prophylaxis and 114 had not received same. Of the 233 who received prophylaxis, 26(11.15%) had exposed with person/s having flu like symptoms, 206 had no history of exposure, while 35 were unsure of it. Arsenic album was the most commonly taken homoeopathic prophylaxis as single dose once in a day maximum for 3 days. Prophylaxis was taken in maximum cases for 3 days and in dosage of once in a day. 54.07% participants who have taken homeoprophylaxis were, 'very confident' about the protective effect of the medication.

Conclusions: Further detailed survey on large number of participants is need of future to assess the effects of homoeopathic prophylaxis.

Keywords: COVID-19, homoeopathy, questionnaire, survey, homoeopathic-prophylaxis

Introduction

Homoeopathy has been a boon in many epidemics since antiquity. The use of homoeopathic prophylaxis (homeoprophylaxis) for epidemic diseases dates back to the time of Hahnemann, who recommended Belladonna for scarlet fever ^[1]. Homeoprophylaxis (HP) is the use of potentised substances in a systematic manner to prevent the development of the characteristic symptoms of infectious diseases. It was first used by Hahnemann in 1798 and has been used since to protect significant number of people against a range of infectious diseases in many countries. It is comparably effective to vaccination and also completely nontoxic and therefore safe ^[2, 3].

There is anecdotal evidence that homoeopathy was successful during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 to 1919, in which at least 20 million people died worldwide. According to the historian Julian Winston, the death rates for patients treated with homoeopathy were 1 to 2% compared to 30 to 60% mortality for those treated with conventional physicians ^[4]. According to a study, the effectiveness of HP was between 63% and 99% with a weight average around 90%, with proven benefits from the widespread use of appropriate HP interventions ^[5].

Homoeopathic prophylaxis were distributed before, during and after lockdown by various government run homoeopathic dispensaries, private practitioners, Non Government Organisations, various pharmacies and others. This survey was planned to contribute data to explore the effect of HP in cases of Influenza like illness. As per WHO recommendation and following social distancing norms due to COVID-19 lockdown information was collected via online questionnaire.

Objectives

1. To assess the effects of homoeopathic prophylaxis against flu like symptoms.
2. To identify the most commonly used medicine for homoeopathic prophylaxis.

Methodology

Setting and design

An online cross-sectional survey was conducted in Uttar Pradesh, India during 27th April 2020 to 3rd May 2020, the timeline where the country was in middle of lockdowns. Due to the pandemic it was not feasible to carry a community-based survey. The survey was conducted in the form of questionnaire which was available online on Google forms. The survey questionnaire link was generated and forwarded amongst the government medical officers, private practitioners and other COVID & non COVID workers. A prior ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the institutional ethics committee of National Homoeopathic Medical College, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India [Ref. F. No. 1099, dated 25. 04. 2020].

Participants

The participants for the survey were selected from the population of Uttar Pradesh. Participants were also requested to forward the survey link to their contacts. Participants were informed that by responding to the questionnaire, they were agreeing to participate in this survey willingly and permit to utilize its outcomes in the form of publications. In any stage participant intended to leave the survey, they were free to close the link without clicking the submit tab. All information received had been kept strictly confidential and the data was analyzed without revealing the identity of any individual participant. Confidentiality of subjects was maintained according to 'ethical principle for medical research involving human subjects' [6].

Questionnaire

An adaptation of CCRH questionnaire for influenza like illness [7] was used for this survey along with few modifications by authors. For adaptability and understanding by the study participants' questionnaire was formed in local language i.e. 'Hindi'. Questionnaire consisted of 22 questions with appropriate options, which could be well responded in 5-7 minutes approximately. The demographic data including habits and addiction was included in first 10 questions. History of exposure to an infected person suffering from flu like illness, any symptom developed after exposure, intensity of symptom if any, were dealt in Q 11 and 12(a & b).

Q13-20 were related to intake of HP against flu-like illness within the past 4 months, duration of intake, doses, confidence regarding the protective effect of the homoeopathic medication taken and from where the prophylactic homoeopathic medicine was obtained.

The face validity of the questionnaire was assessed by two homoeopathic researchers: one with more than 30 years of experience and the other with 15 years of experience. Survey process was pilot tested by two experts: one homoeopathic practitioner with 15 years of experience and another, an academician having master degrees in Hindi and English. The survey was conducted in the form of questionnaire which was available online on Google forms. The survey questionnaire link was generated and forwarded amongst the government medical officers, private practitioners and other COVID & non COVID workers. Participants were also requested to forward the survey link to their contacts. Participants were informed that by responding to the questionnaire, they were agreeing to participate in this survey willingly and permit to utilize its

outcomes in the form of publications. In any stage participant intended to leave the survey, they were free to close the link without clicking the submit tab. All information received had been kept strictly confidential and the data was analyzed without revealing the identity of any individual participant.

Statistical analysis plan

The details collected were subjected to statistical processing. Data was analyzed using the descriptive statistics.

Results

A total of 347 responses were received on closing date (3rd May 2020) of survey. Out of these 233 received HP and 114 hadn't received any HP. A few questions had open responses and therefore, random digits or typographical errors were identified in some responses.

Demographic data

Mean age of respondents was 36.94±14.63. Maximum number of respondents were from 30-44 years age group (n=155, 44.66%) [Fig. 1, Table 1]. There were 246(70.90%) males and 101(29.10%) females. Most of the individuals were educated, among them 250 (71.8%) were graduate or above, 50 (14.4%) have secondary level of education, 48 (8.8%) were having education up to secondary level. 127 (36.5%) respondents were COVID warriors (Doctors, nurses, para medics, police personals, sanitization workers, media reporter etc.) [See: Table 1]

Table 1: Demographic data (n=347)

Gender	
Male	246(70.7%)
Female	102(29.3%)
others	0
Age	
less than 15 years	12(3.45%)
15-29 years	85(24.49%)
30-44 years	155(44.66%)
45-59 years	74(21.32%)
60 years and above	21(6.05%)
Educational status	
Upto Class 10th	48(13.8%)
Upto Class 12th	50(14.4%)
Graduate or above	250(71.8%)
COVID warriors	
Yes	127(3.5%)
No	221(63.5%)
Kind of diet do you followed by participants	
Vegetarian	289(83%)
Non-Vegetarian but take egg only	24(6.9%)
Non-Vegetarian	35(10.1%)
How often do you smoke?	
Never	298(87.4%)
Rarely	39(11.4%)
Very often	4(1.2%)

Maximum number of the individuals who participated in the survey were from Varanasi (72, 20.74%) followed by Mathura (57, 16.42%), Meerut (30, 8.64%), Ghaziabad (23, 6.62%) and Aligarh (20, 5.76%). Total responses were received from 40 districts of Uttar Pradesh. Four responders, reported their response as U.P. or Uttar Pradesh [Fig. 2]

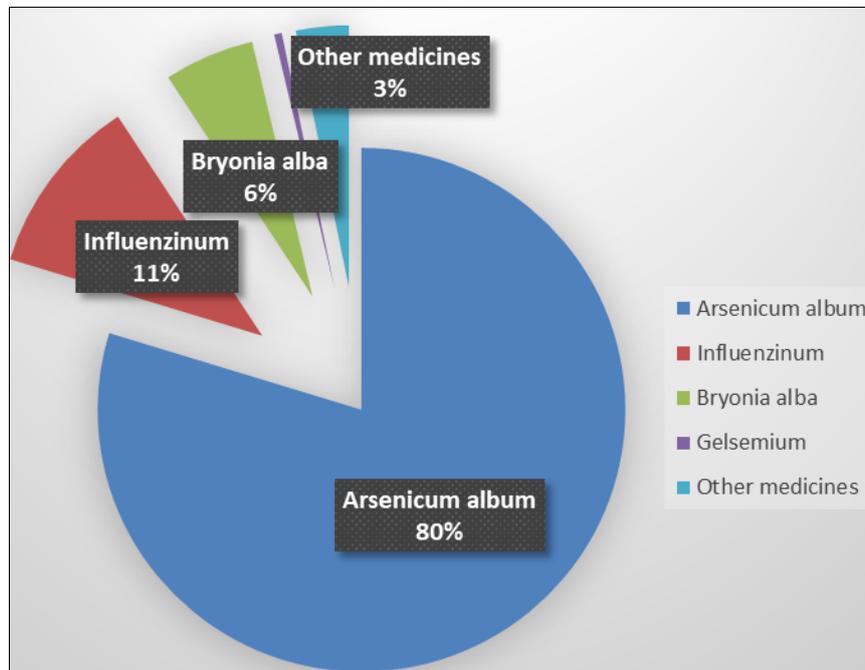


Fig 1: Homoeopathic medicines taken as prophylactic

Table 2: Intake of homeoprophylaxis and history of exposure to person suffering from flu like illness

Within the past 1 month, did you come in contact with an infected person suffering from symptoms of a flu-like illness? [Flu-like illness - Fever, Cough, breathing difficulty, Sore throat, Hoarseness, Sneezing, Running nose etc.]	
Yes	31(8.9%)
No	281(81%)
Not sure	35(10.1%)
Have you taken any homoeopathic drug as prophylactic against flu-like illness within the past 4 months?	
Yes	233 (67.2%)
No	114 (32.8%)
Which homoeopathic medicine have you taken as prophylactic?	
<i>Arsenicum album</i>	173(74.24%)
<i>Bryonia alba</i>	12(5.15%)
<i>Camphor</i>	0
<i>Gelsemium</i>	1(0.42%)
<i>Influenzinum</i>	24(10.30%)
<i>Other medicine</i>	7(3.00%)
For how many days did you take the homoeopathic medicine?	
1 day	29(12.44%)
2 days	8(3.43%)
3 days	108(46.35%)
4 days	13(5.57%)
5 days	27(11.58%)
6 days	2(0.85%)
7 days	8(3.43%)
8-14 days	22(9.44%)
more than 14 days	11(4.72%)
No response (blank column)	5(2.14%)
How many times a day did you take the homoeopathic medicine?	
Once a day	103(44.20%)
Twice a day	90(38.62%)
Thrice a day	28(12.01%)
Four times in a day	9(3.86%)
More than 4 times a day	0
No response (blank column)	03(1.28%)
How confident are you regarding the protective effect of the homoeopathic medication taken by you?	
Not confident at all	0
Less confident	14(6.00%)
Not sure	4(1.71%)

Confident	84(36.05%)
Very confident	126(54.07%)
Blank(no response)	5(2.14%)
From where did you obtain the prophylactic homoeopathic medicine?	
Governmental setup (Medical College, Hospital or dispensary)	78(33.47%)
Doctor at a private clinic	72(30.90%)
Local Pharmacy/shop	38(16.30%)
Family, relatives, friends or acquaintances	32(13.73%)
Other	8(3.43%)
Blank(no response)	5(2.14%)
Are you suffering from any of the following?	
Allergic cold	13
Sinusitis	2
Bronchitis	1
Asthma	5
Diabetes Mellitus	10
High Blood Pressure	10
Heart disease	3
Liver disease	0
Kidney disease	3
Neurological disease	0
Cancer	2
Skin disease	6
Thyroid disorder	7
Joint pains/diseases	15
I don't have any disease	270

Homoeopathic drug as prophylactic against flu-like illness

As per the received data from respondents, 233 had taken prophylaxis and out of these 143 had taken at least four weeks before filling of survey form. 90 respondents had taken within last four weeks, 114 had not received any HP. *Arsenic album* had been taken by 74.24% (n=173) respondents as prophylactic, followed by Influenzinum (n=24, 10.30%), Bryonia alba (n=12, 5.15%) and Gelsemium(n=1, 0.42%). However, 16 respondents were

not aware of the name of the HP taken by them whereas seven responders answered it under option ‘others’. [Fig. 1, Table 2]

108 (46.35%) respondents had taken prophylactic medicine for three days. 12.4% (n=29) had taken HP only for one day, 27(11.58%) for 5 days and 22(9.44%) for 8-14 days. Five respondents had left this column blank [Table 2]. 103(44.20%) respondents have taken prophylactic medicine once a day while 90(38.62%) have taken it twice a day. [Fig. 3 Table 2]

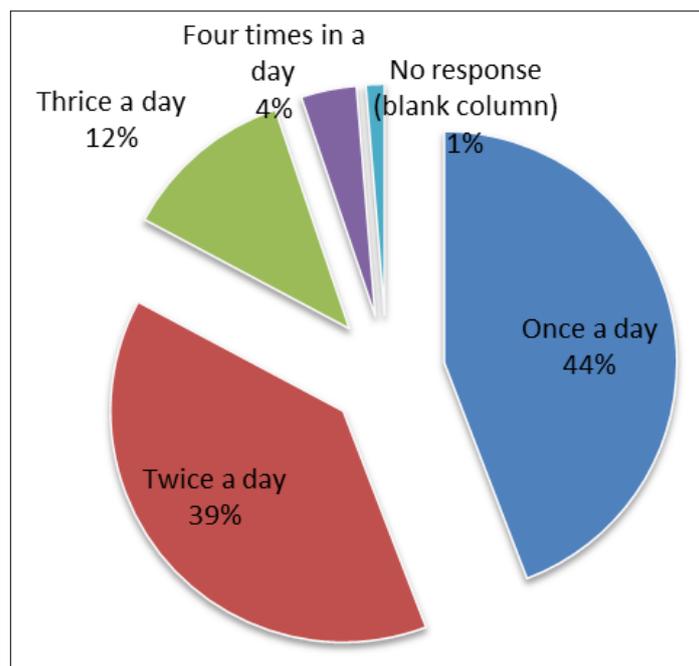


Fig 3: Frequency of dosage of homoeopathic prophylaxis

126(54.07%) participants those who have taken HP were, ‘very confident’ about the protective effect of the

homoeopathic medication. Furthermore, 36.05% (n=84) were, 'confident.' At the same time six percent (n=14) were, 'less confident'. Four respondents were not sure of

protective effect and five had left it unfilled [Fig. 4, Table 2].

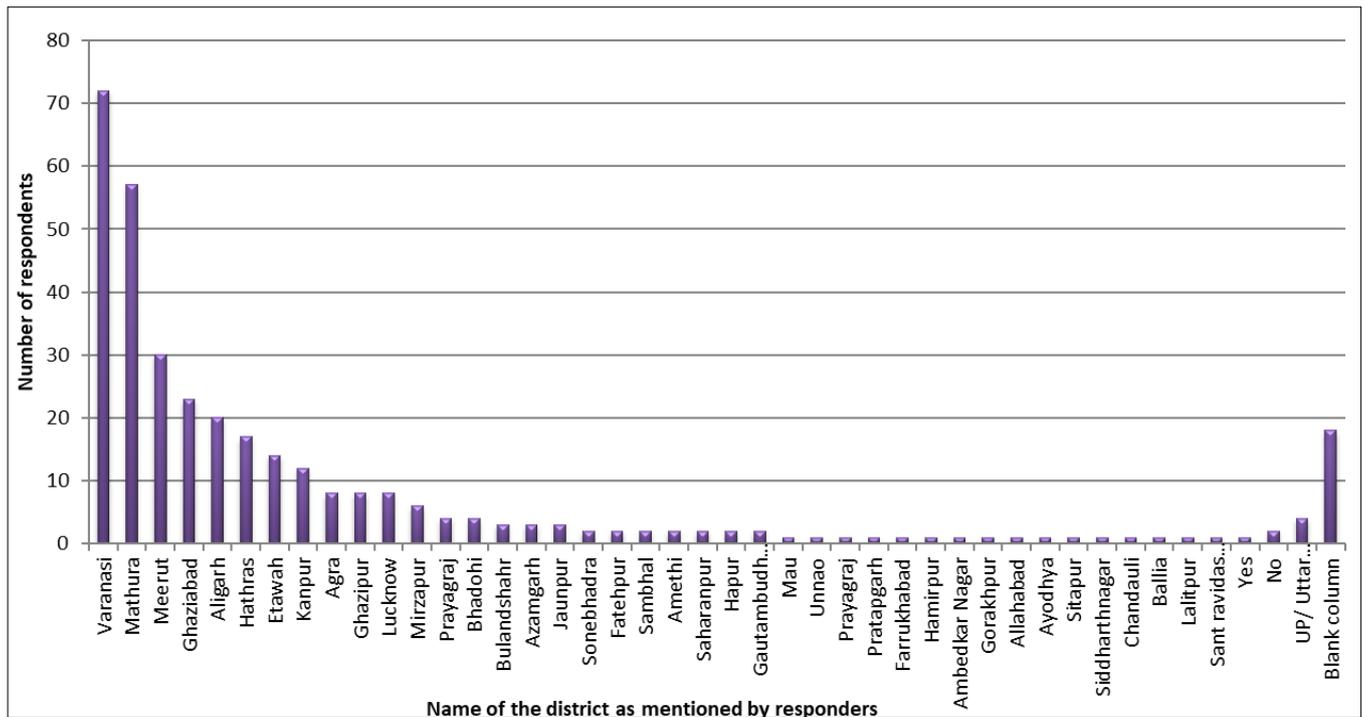


Fig 2: District wise number of responders (n=347)

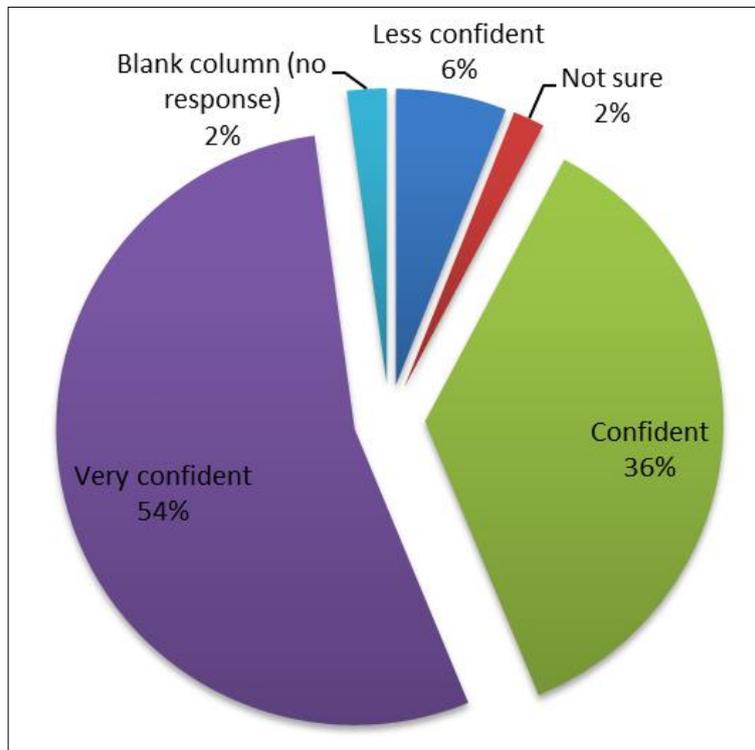


Fig 4: Confidence in the protective effect of the homoeopathic prophylaxis

Seventy-eight (33.47%) participants who took prophylactic medicine, obtained it from governmental set up. 72 got it from doctors at private clinic. 32 procured from local

pharmacies and 32 got it from family members, relatives, friends and acquaintances. [Fig 5, Table 2].

Table 3: Development of symptoms in individuals who have taken homoeopathic prophylaxis (n=233)

Development of symptoms in individuals who have taken homoeopathic prophylaxis (n=233)				
	Did not have this symptom	within last 15 days	between 16 days to 30 days before	No response(blank)
Fever	208	2	1	22
Dry Cough	204	3	3	23
Cough with sputum	198	5	6	24
Blood in sputum	208	0	0	25
Breathing difficulty	206	2	1	24
Runny nose	200	5	3	25
Decreased sense of smell	207	0	1	25
Sneezing	191	10	4	28
Sore throat	193	10	8	22
Throat congestion	200	5	1	27
Ear pain	204	0	1	28
Redness in eyes	201	3	1	28
Pain in Head	202	4	3	24
Confusion	200	7	0	26
Chest pain	202	0	2	29
Nausea/vomiting	205	2	0	26
Diarrhoea	201	0	4	28
Pain in muscles or joints	198	3	5	27
Tiredness	198	6	5	24
Skin Rash	204	2	0	27

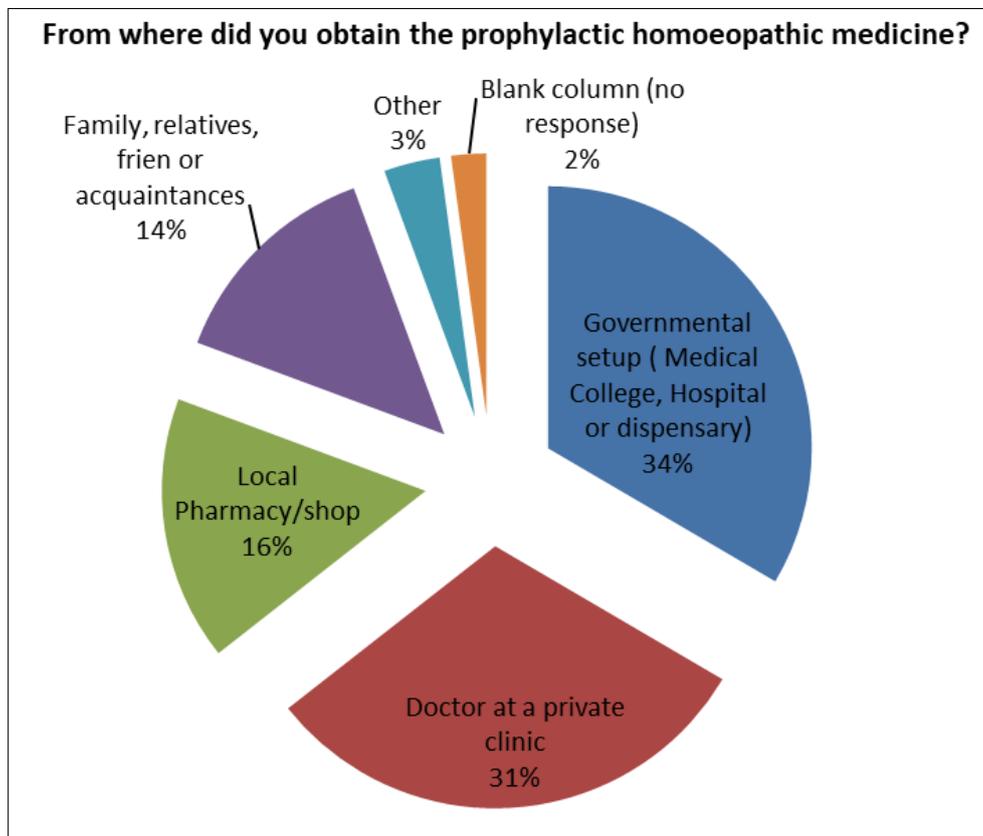


Fig 5: Place of procuring prophylactic homoeopathic medicine

Fifteen participants were having joint pains/ diseases, 13 participants were having allergic cold, 10 were hypertensive, 10 were diabetic, 7 were suffering from thyroid disorders, 6 were having skin illnesses, 5 were asthmatic and so on. Two respondents reported suffering from cancer. [Table 2]

Contact with an infected person suffering from symptoms of a flu-like illness? [Flu-like illness - Fever, Cough, Breathing difficulty, Sore throat, Hoarseness, Sneezing, Running nose etc.]

From total of 347 respondents, 31 had history of contact

with person suffering from symptoms of flu like illness, 281 had no history of exposure with infected person, while 35 were unsure of it. [Fig. 6]

Amongst the 31 respondents who came in contact of infected persons, 26 had already taken HP before exposure. Development of FLU like symptoms if any, in individuals who have taken HP(n=233)

No history of fever in past month was reported by 208 respondents who have taken HP, two reported having fever within past 15 days, and one reported having it 15-30 days back. Four reported having dry cough in last 15 days, while

another four had dry cough 15 - 30 days before the survey. No history of blood in sputum was reported in any. In past

15 days sneezing and sore throat was reported by maximum number of patients ($n=10$) [Table 3].

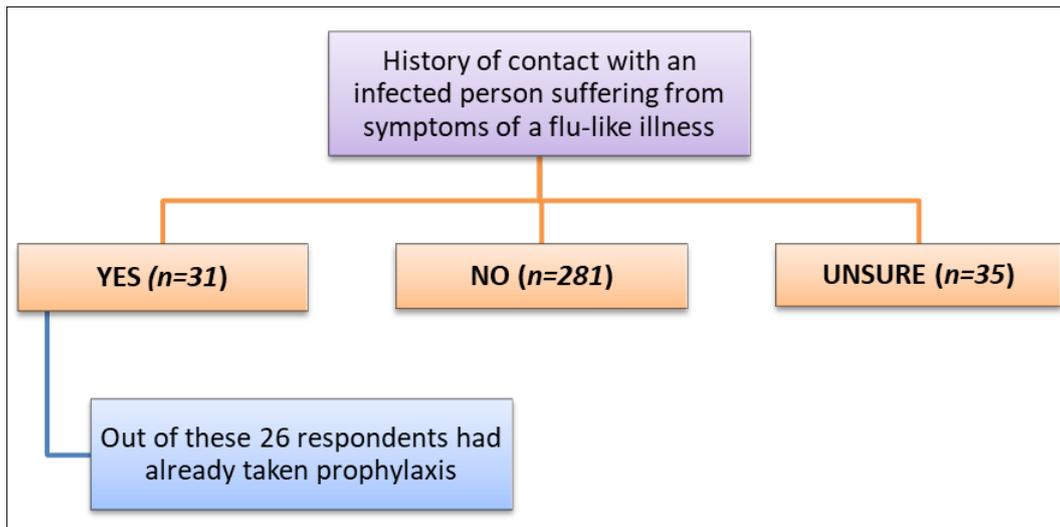


Fig 6: History of exposure with an infected person suffering from symptoms of a flu-like illness

Response of those 26 responders who have taken HP and had come in contact of infected person

None of responders had any severe symptoms except difficulty of breathing in one responder who had also reported having asthma as co-morbidity, other symptoms were mild or absent as reported by this respondent. [Table 4] Mild fever was reported by one respondent and no fever by 21 respondents; while 21 respondents had left this response column blank. Mild and moderate dry cough was

reported in six and two respondents respectively while no dry cough was reported by 16. Mild cough with sputum was reported by six while two respondents reported moderate wet cough. Mild running nose was reported by five respondents. Mild decrease sense of smell was reported by one after coming in contact with infected person, no loss of smell was reported by 19, while other six responders did not respond to the query.

Table 4: Response of those 26 responders who have taken homoeopathic prophylaxis and have come in contact of infected person ($n=26$)

Please indicate the severity with which you may have developed each of the following symptoms. (Mild/Moderate-requiring some modification of activity, Severe – Requiring very major modification in daily activity)					
	NONE	MILD	MODERATE	SEVERE	RESPONSE BLANK
Fever	21	1	0	0	4
Dry Cough	16	3	1	0	6
Cough with sputum	12	6	2	0	6
Blood in sputum	20	0	0	0	6
Breathing difficulty	18	1	0	1	6
Runny nose	17	5	0	0	4
Decreased sense of smell	19	1	0	0	6
Sneezing	15	7	0	0	4
Sore throat	15	3	3	0	5
Throat congestion	17	3	0	0	6
Ear pain	20	0	0	0	6
Redness in eyes	18	4	0	0	4
Pain in Head	17	3	0	0	6
Confusion	20	2	0	0	4
Chest pain	17	3	0	0	6
Nausea/vomiting	18	2	0	0	6
Diarrhoea	20	0	0	0	6
Pain in muscles or joints	17	3	2	0	4
Tiredness	15	5	0	0	6
Skin Rash	20	2	0	0	4

Severe breathing difficulty was reported by one patient (also reported to have bronchial asthma as co-morbidity), mild difficulty by one, none by 18 responders. Mild sore throat and throat congestion was reported by three respondents after exposure. Three respondents reported mild chest pain while mild tiredness was reported by five. Mild skin rash were reported by two whereas two reported mild confusion

after exposure. Furthermore, none of the responders reported blood in sputum, diarrhea and ear pain after coming in contact with person suffering from flu like illness.

Discussion

Prophylaxis is the great preoccupation of all physicians and

biologists. For HP in infectious diseases we need not hunt the bacteria or virus for the vaccination^[3]. This is because homoeopathic therapy is symptomatic and not materialistic and emphasis is on totality of symptoms as patient's disease and not on virus^[8]. Interestingly, an epidemic requires different remedies when rages in different places. The prophylactic can be found by collecting the symptomatology of few patients of an epidemic in an area. This remedy can act as the curative as well as the preventive medicine during the specified epidemic for that area.

A few clinical trials in Influenza like illness with homoeopathic intervention were conducted in the past with a positive result^[9, 10]. A controlled clinical trial was conducted to assess the effectiveness of a homoeopathic preparation in the treatment of influenza-like syndromes. The proportion of cases who recovered within 48 hours of treatment was greater among the active drug group than among the placebo group^[11].

The Health advisory is given by The Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) against corona virus infection included Homoeopathic medicine *Arsenicum album* – 30 as a possible preventive measure for flu-like illness such as COVID-19 infection^[12, 13]. Scientific Advisory Board of CCRH confirmed that the same medicine has been advised for the prevention of Influenza-Like Illness.

More than half of the responders (n=233, 67.3%) had taken HP. With the paucity of literature of related similar survey, a comparative analysis couldn't be performed. Responders who have taken homoeopathic prophylaxis either don't develop any symptoms or mild symptoms when came in contact of person suffering from symptoms of flu like illness (n=26). As the number of responders is only 26, no valid conclusion can be drawn.

Most of the participants had the optimistic attitude and had the confidence on HP; ninety percent of participants who had taken HP were confident about its effect (very confident, n=126, confident, n=84). This indicates compliance and acceptance for homoeopathic medicines.

Survey responders includes 37.5% COVID warriors who find themselves at the frontline of attempts to quell the outbreak, and are prone to come in contact of persons infected with flu like symptoms. Out of 26 respondents who took homoeopathic prophylaxis and were exposed to person with flu like illness 15 were COVID warriors.

Source of medicine is from governmental set up, private clinics, local pharmacies, family and relatives, most common being governmental set up, which includes Homoeopathic medical colleges, hospitals and dispensaries. India has an ideal, imitable model worldwide for offering alternative systems of medicine just on the same shelf as standard medicine. It is worthy of notice that the Homoeopathy framework in India is substantially significant to offer a considerable role in the public health setups in general and in health emergencies, in particular. This applies both to infrastructure and skilled resources (homoeopathic practitioners).

HP was taken for 3 days by 46.35% (n=108). Majority of patients took prophylaxis only once a day (44.20%, n=103). HP was taken for three days and once a day by most of the responders which was according to the advisory of ministry of AYUSH, Government of India^[12].

Arsenicum album was most commonly used prophylaxis (74.24%, n=173). The Health advisory given by Ministry of

AYUSH, Government of India against corona virus infection included Homoeopathic medicine *Arsenicum album* 30C as a possible preventive which followed the preventive distribution of the homoeopathic medicine in various states in India^[12].

It is noteworthy that the *Arsenicum album* is a common homoeopathic remedy prescribed in the cases of respiratory infections in day to day practice. Fundamental research has also shown the ultra-high potentised dilutions of this drug to modulate immune responses as well as gene modification, as one of the constituents in a formulation^[14, 15].

Pharmacologically, the *Arsenicum album* as one of the constituents in a formulation has been shown to act upon HT29 cells and human macrophages. Also, it showed an inhibitory effect on NF-κB hyperactivity (reduced expression of reporter gene GFP in transfecting HT29 cells), and inhibition of TNF-α release in macrophages^[16].

Responders also reported co morbidities like diabetes mellitus (n=10), hypertension (n=10), thyroid disorders (n=7), asthma (n=5), bronchitis (n=1), kidney diseases (n=3), malignancy (n=2), joint diseases (n=15) etc. Ailments such as cancer, diabetes mellitus, cardiac diseases or life style choices such as smoking can all contribute to weakened immune system and are possible risk factors for acquiring flu like illness and other infections^[17].

In China, doctors constituted two sets of homoeopathic symptom pictures of COVID-19 indicating *Bryonia alba* and *Gelsemium*. They gave *Gelsemium* 30C as a preventive medicine to 4-5% of the population in one area and in another area out of 6,00,000 people, 50% got *Gelsemium*. In both the areas no sick people were recorded. They also treated several mild or medium ill COVID-19 patients with *Gelsemium*, *Bryonia alba*, *Eupatorium perforatum* in succession. They started to recover on first day and within 3 days they were healthy^[17]. The American Institute of Homeopathy database reveals *Bryonia alba* and *Arsenicum album* make up about 50% of the successful prescriptions^[18].

Though the sample size of this survey is limited, its strength lies in its timely implementation like exactly at the verge of the lockdown restrictions as this assessment would further help the policymakers to understand the future strategies in combating the pandemic situation.

In addition to the limited sample representativeness, also the assessment questions for practices and attitudes towards homoeopathy could have been more in-depth to have more precise understanding. As the questionnaire was developed within a limited time, it could not be much elaborated.

Homeopathy has earned considerable attention in recent times, with a large number of patients getting and following homoeopathic medicines for both the treatment and prevention of their complaints. Amid the dynamically changing situation, arrangements and preparedness the role of homoeopathy remains largely minimal much to the consternation of the homoeopathic sector. Homeopathy should ascent up to combat the challenge of the COVID 19 pandemic and to rejuvenate faith based on scientific validation. Awareness campaigns are needed to make people more aware about Homeopathy and its effectiveness in treatment and prevention of flu like illness.

Conclusion

Further detailed survey on large number of participants is needed to assess the effects of homoeopathic prophylaxis.

Awareness campaigns are needed to make people more aware about homoeopathy and its effectiveness in treatment and prevention of flu like illness.

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest

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