

## Chapter 2. "It is a debate that will probably overwhelm me"

### *First quakings*

The introduction of high dilutions in Unit 200 of Inserm led by J. Benveniste was due to Bernard Poitevin. This latter was a homeopathic physician, but he had also a "classical" scientific training. In 1980, he met J. Benveniste to ask him to direct his thesis. J. Benveniste – who had moved to a new location in Clamart near hospital Antoine Bécclère – accepted. At the beginning, it was not question of homeopathy. The subject of the thesis of B. Poitevin concerned the production of free radicals by inflammatory cells.

B. Poitevin afterwards got in touch with Michel Aubin, the scientific director of the *Laboratoires Homéopathiques de France* (LHF). A first contract was signed in 1982 between LHF and the laboratory of J. Benveniste to assess the effect of homeopathic products on some biological models of the laboratory. In 1983, B. Poitevin became scientific director of LHF.

In 1982, J. Benveniste was approached by Boiron Laboratories to reproduce results that had been obtained by Jean Sainte-Laudy on basophil degranulation. The latter was a physician who managed a private laboratory of medical analysis in Paris, specialized in medical immunology. He particularly used the "test of degranulation of basophils" – developed by J. Benveniste – as an *in vitro* method for the diagnosis of allergies. Besides, J. Sainte-Laudy was interested in homeopathic high dilutions and he worked on this subject with Boiron Laboratories for several years. A first contract with Boiron was signed by J. Benveniste in 1983.

Two research programs intended to assess homeopathic products on *in vitro* biological models were thus simultaneously led during several years in the laboratory of J. Benveniste for two rival firms, LHF and Boiron (they merged in 1988), sometimes on identical models, on the test of degranulation of basophils in particular. This biological test will be detailed in the next chapters (see also Appendix 1).

During the next years, the most significant results obtained in the Unit 200 concerned the reproduction of some of the results of J. Sainte-Laudy, namely the inhibitory effect of histamine at high dilutions on basophil degranulation. Another study managed by B. Poitevin concerned the effect of silica at high dilutions in mouse. Besides, B. Poitevin also obtained significant results with *Apis Mellifica* – a homeopathic product – on basophil degranulation. The latter

presented his results to the “Forum of the young researchers” in Lille in September 1984 and these results were published in January 1986 in a journal which – it must be underscored – was not a “journal of homeopaths”, but a journal that published studies concerning new biomedical technologies. This first “breakthrough” was perceived by J. Benveniste and B. Poitevin as an encouragement to persist in their attempts to go out of the “ghetto” of journals dedicated to homeopathy, which – we must admit – are not very demanding on the level of proof and the quality of the submitted results.

In these experiments, homeopathic dilutions of *Apis Mellifica* decreased basophil degranulation. *Apis Mellifica* is a homeopathic medicine sold in pharmacy for the treatment of acute inflammation. There was some publicity around these results in the media before their publication. The reactions that these experiments aroused deserve to be described because they anticipated the repercussions that the publication in *Nature* induced a few years later.

*Apis mellifica, queen for a day*

On January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1985, a round table on homeopathy was organized in Puteaux in the suburb of Paris by the medical journal *Impact-Médecin*. Physicians – homeopaths or “skeptics” – representatives of associations of homeopaths or representatives of the homeopathic industry participated, as well as J. Benveniste.<sup>1</sup> Public and journalists were present during the exchanges of views. During the discussion, J. Benveniste reported that now the question of high dilutions – a major obstacle which prevents the recognition of homeopathy by scientists – was no more a problem. To support his statements, he described the results obtained in his laboratory that evidenced a biological effect with *Apis Mellifica* at dilutions where no molecule of the initial compound could in principle be present.

*Impact-Médecin* published a report of this debate on February 23<sup>rd</sup> and this information was widely covered by the media. J. Benveniste denied then to have wanted this publicity and asserted that the results were published “without his agreement and in a premature way”.<sup>2</sup> He nevertheless distributed photocopies, which summarized these results during the meeting. B. Poitevin himself regretted this diffusion, not understanding why J. Benveniste displayed these experimental data in such a detailed manner.

In any case, the reading of the press articles that reported this information is interesting because homeopathy and its possible therapeutic properties were then pointed out. One did not yet speak of revolutionizing physics and biology. J. Benveniste, at that moment, seemed careful and he did not make audacious extrapolations as he did a few years later:

"When I agreed to test these various homeopathic products, I was very skeptical [...]. I knew nothing about homeopathy, and my scientific culture – I would say even scientific – incited me rather to think that homeopathy was only a placebo. Hence my great surprise when I saw the first results. [...]

We must certainly not draw conclusions on the therapeutic efficacy of these various products. A biological effect was observed. Neither more nor less." <sup>3</sup>

And, when one pointed out to him that it was the first time that a "team of international reputation" published such results, he added, auguring without knowing it:

"You know, that is the way it is, there is nothing we can do about it. It is a debate that will probably overwhelm me, which already overwhelm me maybe. But the facts are there."

Eventhough there was some suspicion coming from sceptics, it concerned rather the manufacturer who supplied the tested solutions and who would have been able "according to some committed opponents of homoeopathy [...] to replace *Apis Mellifica* by corticoids" <sup>4,5</sup>. But the sincerity of the researchers of Clamart was not questioned.

Although these results seemed promising, nevertheless they remained preliminary and J. Benveniste took a lot of risks by advancing so openly. The results were then not published and had not been submitted to the "judgment of peers". Furthermore they had not been reproduced in other laboratories and some control experiments to eliminate experimental biases had not been yet performed (blind experiments for example).

The friendly, and sometimes accommodating, welcome which was granted to these results in the media was probably due to the climate at that time. Homeopathy as therapeutics came to national attention in 1984. The Minister of Social Affairs, Georgina Dufoix, was favorable to "alternative medicines" and the reimbursement of homeopathic medicines by Social Security was agreed that year. Contrary to the other medicines that have to give evidence of their efficacy, it is enough for the homeopathic specialties to refer to the "tradition" to be recognized. Besides this political determination to promote what some people considered as quackery, the Academy of medicine denounced a return to irrationality explaining that "in the present state of science, the homeopathic prescription is not an act of reason, but an act of faith" and wondered with some irony if it would be necessary in the future "to consider the dowsing rod

as an official tool of diagnosis besides the stethoscope and the laying-on of hands as a therapeutic process?”<sup>6</sup>

Far from media, however, when the researchers of Inserm U200 experimented at the bench, they noticed that the effects of the homeopathic products, if they existed, were nevertheless variable and often capricious. The exploration of the physico-chemical properties of the homeopathic high dilutions appeared thus difficult without an experimental model working with more regularity. In the absence of such a model, the bet of J. Benveniste would be probably very adventurous.

Notes of end of chapter

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<sup>1</sup> Among the "skeptics", H. Gounelle of Pontanel of the Academy of medicine, C. Laroche of the National council of the Order of Doctors, M.F. Kahn, Professor of medicine, specialist in rheumatology, were present; among "pro-homoeopathy", there were P. Cornillot, dean of the faculty of Medicine of Bobigny, M. Tétaut and F. Buraud, both representatives of societies of homeopaths and Jean Boiron, co-founder and director of laboratories Boiron (from M. Rouzé. Mieux connaître l'homéopathie. *La Découverte* 1989, p. 185).

<sup>2</sup> *Le Nouvel Observateur*, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> F. Nouchi. Certains produits homéopathiques ont des effets biologiques [*Some homeopathic products have biological effects*]. *Le Monde*, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, corticosteroids have no effect on basophil degranulation in the *in vitro* experimental conditions to assess the effect of *Apis mellifica*. Degranulation of basophils and histamine release are too fast phenomena to be inhibited by corticosteroids the action of which requires protein synthesis. In order to inhibit basophil degranulation with a corticosteroid, an incubation of 24 hours is necessary.

<sup>5</sup> F. Nouchi. *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gounelle de Pontanel H, Tuchmann-Duplessis H. Non à la délivrance d'un diplôme d'homéopathie par les facultés de médecine [*No for the delivery of a diploma of homoeopathy by the faculties of medicine*]. *Bull Acad Nat Méd* 1984; 168: 429.

## Crossed portrait #2

By Philippe Alfonsi

### “The profile of the perfect mandarin“

“ “The man through whom the scandal arrives”, Jacques Benveniste, is one of the most renowned French immunologists. He has the profile of the perfect mandarin, he says himself with a smile. Ironic with ease, caustic, iconoclast, he manages a laboratory, the prestigious Unit 200 of the *Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale* (Inserm). He has an international reputation since he discovered paf-acether, a mediator involved in some allergic mechanisms. Before "the affair", he was frequently presented as one of the rare French who could win the Nobel prize in his area of research.”

(*Au Nom de la Science*, 1989, p.11)