

# An Interview with Massimo Mangialavori, M.D.

Interviewed by: Heather Knox

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**AH:** One of the things I am inspired by is your knowledge of the homeopathic materia medica. Can you tell me how you learn about a remedy?

**Mangialavori:** I have learned the most important things about remedies from my own cases. What I like most is to have a living picture of a remedy. The material we have in our books and in the repertories is mostly very "cold" and not so instructive, at least apart from the so-called polychrests. When I was first learning, most teachers gave just their opinions, which often were mere repetitions of repetitions of repetitions. Very few teachers were able to deliver authentic and reliable information, which I believe are necessary steps to a deeper understanding of a remedy picture.

I was astonished to see how little connected to the reality of cured cases the teaching could be. I have been to many seminars where people had very strange ideas about certain remedies. They were able to speak in an amazing, brilliant and fantastic way about these ideas but mostly what they taught was not attached to the reality of cured patients. I insist that it is more important to have good cures than to have brilliant ideas. These cures should be documented. This is what Hahnemann taught us.

I consider a well-documented case to be the story of the patient, the patient's suffering and the patient's healing process, reported over a long time (at least one to two years), in the patient's own words and not simply the connection of symptoms. I am very disturbed when I read case reports that are nothing but a list of symptoms. I totally disagree with this. I think that this is allopathic, not homeopathic thinking. We criticize the allopaths for making their diagnosis only on some pathological symptoms; but it is exactly the same attitude when you come to a homeopathic remedy by saying this patient has a fear of thunderstorms, a desire for salt and a desire for ice cream and therefore it is a case of Phosphorus. It is like saying "there is this or that amount of red blood cells, protein, sodium, etc." It is exactly the same as allopathic thinking. From this you cannot derive any understanding of the patient. I believe the only way to get a vivid experience of a remedy picture is to collect well-documented cured cases. Until you have seen a cure from a remedy, using all your senses to see what was really healed -- what the process was -- how can you have a clear experience of such a remedy? This is the only way in which everyone of us can develop a clear experience with a remedy.

So, to come back to your question, I have collected those of my cases, where the remedy had worked in both the patient's chronic and acute conditions, and for a long time. Then I studied this material thoroughly for a better (and more often for a first) understanding of a remedy. I tried to find out what was common in the cases and in the stories of the patients, in their words, explanations and descriptions of their state and the history of this state. This, I believe, is crucial and absolutely necessary if you want to develop as a homeopath rather than relying on very dry second-hand information. Your own work is your best teacher.

**AH:** You have spoken about the importance of studying well documented cases. You mentioned that you are working on the Delphi Project?

**Mangialavori:** Yes, it is something I am seriously involved with because I have to say that I am really fed up with this mass of material that we have and which contains just copies of copies of copies of other books. I think this is totally useless. I don't understand why homeopaths need to write books on remedies that don't belong to their own range of experience. It's stupid and it is also risky. If you have good ideas and good experiences about some remedies, it is better to write about them and nothing else. Thus, much good old information becomes diluted and further diluted until it's just a watery soup.

In our Delphi Project, which is still in its initial phase, we are collecting cured cases where both the case report and the follow-ups are carefully documented. What our time needs most is authentic and valid information about experiences with remedies in cured people. After a certain number of cases have been collected the aim is to review them and to publish the essentials or themes which could be derived from such cases. This alone can be the material of a real materia medica viva.

**AH:** You talked about developing a vivid picture to learn remedies. What would you suggest to students for studying materia medica?

**Mangialavori:** The best way to study materia medica is to study well-taken and well-treated cases. You can call yourself lucky if you find a teacher who follows this very practical model of teaching.

Secondly, it is very useful to have an idea what the remedy substance is. I don't think you can use Aurum successfully without knowing that Aurum is gold; you can't use Bufo without knowing that Bufo is a toad. Unfortunately, our homeopathic literature gives very little information about the substances, therefore you have to find sources yourself. We do have a lot of very useful biological, chemical, physiological, pharmacological and --what is also very important -- anthropological and medical historical information about the relation of all these minerals, plants and animals with human life. All this information is of the utmost interest to us and can very often lead directly to the center of a much deeper understanding for the use of a homeopathic remedy. These studies must include all relevant material wherever it may

come from and without any prejudice. Old mythological narration and fairy tales which center around a plant, for example, can be very instructive. Very often you can detect an essential focus of a remedy in the history of its use or in its name. You might get very precious information about indications for a snake remedy through studying the life of these animals.

My third suggestion concerns our homeopathic materia medica itself. When studying remedies, we have two problems. Very often, when remedies are well known, we have too much information. On the other hand, when remedies are not well known we have too little information. The challenge is to gather the information in such a way that you either enrich or reduce it by grouping it as "themes." By themes I mean collecting a group of symptoms that have something in common, in which there is a connection, which can help you to understand the remedy. The most important reason for using themes is to arrive at a level of information that is very characteristic for this substance. Here you have two classes of symptoms in a remedy: those symptoms, belonging to the central "themes" and the others that don't. A symptom which can be connected to a central theme is more likely to be of value in prescribing that remedy than any other symptom because it is closer to the core of that remedy.

My approach to studying remedies -- and to make these studies more vivid -- is therefore a threefold one: to use both homeopathic and non-homeopathic material and to study wellcured cases. I think our model of thinking is a very complex one and if you focus only on the proving- symptoms and nothing else it becomes one-sided and much less efficient.

**AH:** I think you have made studying the remedies very fun.

**Mangialavori:** [laughing] Yes. If I don't have fun I can't practice anything; it is an essential part of life. If you don't have pleasure in what you are doing it becomes senseless.

**AH:** What do you think is the biggest weakness in the way homeopathy is practiced today?

**Mangialavori:** I think there are many. First, I have the general impression that the difficulty of practicing homeopathy is widely underestimated and many in the field are mere amateurs and poorly prepared to do the job. This is mainly due to inappropriate teaching.

Secondly, many focus on psychological analyses of cases, patients and remedy-pictures with very little professional experience. We are flooded with ready-made, self-created, homeo-psychological interpretations. Psychology, like medicine, is a science that has to be studied. The psychological and medical handling of a patient is a very difficult matter for which you have to be thoroughly trained. This is even more true if you do it in a homeopathic way.

Another big threat to our profession is the carelessness and irresponsible attitude with which quite a few publications present remedy-pictures or provings. Without presenting their sources, without any sufficiently observed and documented cases, the authors claim to detect cores, essences and whatsoever of the newest and latest remedies as if they were partaking in a race. In these discussions I am missing the patience as well as the patients.

**AH:** Do you think homeopathy is in a transition right now?

**Mangialavori:** Homeopathy has been developing for more than 200 years and has always been in transition. Now we have to consider how to practice it in a contemporary and very professional way, using the tremendous knowledge coming out of other scientific fields and finally realizing our possibilities of individualizing have been used far beyond the method's borders.

A good step forward has been that most of us no longer believe it is possible to cure 80% of the diseases with a dozen remedies, as some homeopaths once taught. But instead of proving one new remedy after the other, I would prefer to increase and concentrate our work on elaborating information about the 1500 "known" remedies, most of which, in my view, are more unknown than known.

**AH:** Do you think we are doing too many provings?

**Mangialavori:** I don't think we should stop doing provings as they are very interesting and are the basis of our work. But instead of constantly inventing new remedies we also need to discover more things about those we already have. This feeling that we don't have enough, that we have to have more all the time is a disease, the real pathology, of our era. The results, at this moment, don't show a better quality of understanding of our cases. I would prefer to go deeper with what we have.

**AH:** How does a student make studying the plants as interesting as studying the animals?

**Mangialavori:** There is no principal difference between the study of a plant or the study of an animal if you know how to find material. There is certainly more material about snakes or spiders than about some rare plants; but on the other hand we have such wonderful plants as the Solanaceae which deliver a huge amount of detailed anthropological and historical and pharmacological (toxicological) information. Read the book *Plants of the Gods* and you will be cured of your doubts that the study of plants might be boring.

**AH:** Recently people have been concerned about a school of thought that is teaching that there is not only one simillimum. How do you feel about that?

**Mangialavori:** This discussion has been going on since the time of Hahnemann. It is a typically senseless theoretical dispute. Similarity means similarity and not identity. Life is an individual phenomenon unless you clone an organism. Therefore, it is very clear that similarity can be something more or less, from this view or that view, and there is no precise method to judge similarity in homeopathic terms in any other way than to give a remedy to the suffering organism and see how the vital force reacts. The law of similars is a law that exists not in reality but as simile (a possible remedy in terms of similarity) as well as the simillimum (the best possible remedy in terms of similarity); both are theoretical constructs or hypotheses referring to a diseased state and not existing in reality until you can demonstrate a cure. The quality of the cure can be judged best by the patient who will say "I am better" or "I feel cured." This is the difference between the simile and the simillimum.

**AH:** So you think there is one simillimum and that the other remedies are on the way to it?

**Mangialavori:** Again, nobody can say, how many similes and how many simillimums a disturbed vital force can theoretically respond to in nature. This idea of the simillimum is a theoretical concept; it is something you fix your attention on. You look where the arrow is pointed. The simillimum is both the center of your target and your arrow. But there are other targets and other arrows. The simillimum happens when you are able to shoot your arrow close to the center. Sometimes it happens but not in the majority of our prescriptions.

**AH:** So ultimately you do believe in the simillimum?

Mangialavori. I believe the simillimum is a working hypothesis we use to get close to a cure.

**AH:** What impressions do you have of homeopathy in North America?

**Mangialavori:** It is very difficult to say. I sense people are lively, enthusiastic and open minded. This is my first impression. But I also feel that the cultural background, the education is very different from my own. In fact, I cannot really judge what is happening here and I would like to have more time to observe.

**AH:** Do you have any words of advice for a new student?

**Mangialavori:** First, do not be too impressed by big names and old men's talk because many old teachers in homeopathy are very dogmatic and could easily make you give up your sensitivity and critical attitude in front of their authority. Especially from South America there is a dogmatism which is a mixture of religious narrow-mindedness and the pretension "to know what Hahnemann really thought." This approach is absolutely lifeless and counter-productive. I can say this because I fell amongst those teachers in my beginning and it was an awful waste of time. Endless discussions about miasms, a theory Hahnemann developed but which nobody has ever really understood in its practical value. I don't like the approach about miasms because it is mere theory and does not have much to do with today's reality.

**AH:** So don't study miasms?

**Mangialavori:** No, I wouldn't go that far. But I would like to warn students to avoid becoming fixed in this kind of theoretical study and discussion. It's nothing but a possible explanation, an historical model of understanding. I don't want to give you the impression that I totally reject these thoughts of Hahnemann but I believe we have other and better knowledge today that renders this approach quite unnecessary.

AH. Did you just finish a book?

**Mangialavori:** I am very lazy about this. This first book, I should have finished four years ago. I have rewritten it four times.

All: Is it published?

**Mangialavori:** No, not yet, it should be finished by the end of this year. I hope. It is a book about spiders in homeopathy. It will be published in English and German first.

**AH:** Good! What is your next book?

**Mangialavori:** Probably a book about what we can call, in homeopathic terms, the Solanaceae family. It will be about the remedies close to Belladonna but not only plants from the botanical Solanaceae family. My idea about families is something larger and not exactly the same as in biology and botany. I have often been misunderstood. In my beginning teaching I presented coherent biological groups like the spiders or snakes and people thought a biological relation alone would suffice to make a homeopathic relationship. This is sometimes but not always true. A true homeopathic family integrates members from other kingdoms if their themes are related. For example, Lyssinum is a nosode from the saliva of a dog with rabies, but from its homeopathic materia medica themes, it belongs definitely to the Solanaceae family. This is underlined by the fact that Belladonna, Hyoscyamus and Stramonium are well known for their healing properties in the rabies disease.

**AH:** Do you have other books brewing?

**Mangialavori:** I have enough material for quite a few books. The snakes around Lachesis, the spiders around Tarantula, the sea remedies around Sepia, the Umbelliferae around Conium, the Compositae around Arnica, the Coniferae around

Thuja and not to forget the so-called drugs like Cannabis, Opium, Anhalonium -- substances that were traditionally used as drugs in different cultures. Each world culture has its own special drugs: Coca in South America, Anhalonium in mid-America, Cannabis in North Africa, Opium in the Middle East, Agaricus in Siberia, Kava-Kava in Polynesia. These drugs are very interesting because these substances were originally used to alter consciousness, to discover one's relationship with God. The idea of God is different all over the world and each culture uses a different substance and a different approach although they also have many important features in common. I have researched this material and have good cases too and I would like to work more on it.

**AH:** How do you find time to write?

**Mangialavori:** This indeed is a problem, considering that I have a family. And then there are my two horses and some other animals too. It is absolutely necessary to protect your private life and to have time for yourself to recover and recreate your energy.

In the beginning when I decided to give seminars it was just for fun and because I wanted to share some experiences. I did not feel like a teacher. Since then teaching has become an important part of my work, and I can even say of my life, and it takes many, many weekends.

Sometimes it has become a burden because I receive so many invitations and I have a hard time saying "no!" to somebody. Therefore I have had to learn to use my time in a more economical way, giving breaks to myself, and enjoying freedom from too much responsibility.

**AH:** You were telling me that in the morning you shovel manure and contemplate life. Tell me about this...

**Mangialavori:** It is true, I have two horses, a male and a female of course, and I have to take care of them. They are Pintos, spotted white and black and I chose these horses, because they are not well known and not so much appreciated in Italy. I live in the countryside in northern Italy. I bought an old farmhouse there but I did not imagine how much time, energy and money would be needed to restore it!

**AH:** You have two children?

**Mangialavori:** Yes, the girl, Magdalena is 10 and the boy, Samuel is 8.

They are the most important things in my life. I assisted at their births. They were born in my house. I am very close to them.

I like that they are in contact with animals: dogs, cats, horses. I was in Milan until I was 8 years old and I had no contact with nature. To me this was a disaster. I suffered a lot for this. So I wanted to offer this to my kids. This is the reason why I moved to the countryside.

**AH:** So the manure in the morning?

**Mangialavori:** Ah, the manure in the morning! If you have a horse you have to clean the stable. It is very nice, because you remain very attached to the ground and to the manure of your animals. I can think for half an hour while I use my hands and I even have a product, something I can use for my garden, which is very good for the ground I am living on. I believe it is a good exercise, a kind of meditation, and it is good for your physical body, too. And finally, it reminds you of what you are doing here on earth.