A Special Kind of Practice? The Homeopath Friedrich von Bönninghausen (1828–1910)

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More than 11,500 people consulted the physician Friedrich von Bönninghausen between 1864 and 1889. He noted down details of these consultations in his case journals, devoting a page to each patient. Today, these journals provide documentation of a medical practice in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Westphalian city of Münster. On the basis of Bönninghausen's journals it is possible to reconstruct his activities against the general historical context.

Bönninghausen was, in fact, no ‘orthodox’ physician: although he had graduated from medical school and been sworn in by the authorities of the city of Münster as ‘physician, surgeon and obstetrician’ in 1862, he differed in one essential aspect from other physicians offering their services in the city at the time. He was a homeopath and treated his patients according to principles put forward by Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843), who had founded this medical approach in the early nineteenth century.

Did this make his practice special and, if so, in what way was it different from that of other physicians? These are the questions that this paper seeks to investigate. We begin by introducing Bönninghausen. His case journals form part of this process because they constitute the source on which this research is based. We will then present one case history to illustrate Bönninghausen’s mode of treatment. Next, Bönninghausen’s homeopathic practice – as established from the journals – will be briefly outlined: its size, its clientele and the range of complaints treated. In conclusion, we will offer an answer to the question as to whether and to what extent Bönninghausen’s practice was ‘special’.

1 The total number of patients treated was calculated by adding up the journal entries. The figure constitutes a bottom line, cf. notes 20 and 52. The case journals are kept at the Institute for the History of Medicine of the Robert Bosch Foundation (hereinafter: igm), P 116–49.

Friedrich von Bönninghausen and the Case Journals

Friedrich Paul Joseph Baron von Bönninghausen was born on 14 April 1828 in Münster, Westphalia. His early professional career did not seem to indicate that he would follow in the footsteps of his father, the lay homeopath Clemens von Bönninghausen (1785–1864). Like his father, he first read law before switching to medicine in 1855, although still under the age of 30. He studied at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, graduating cum laude in 1859 with a dissertation on diabetes (De diabete mellito). Once he had gained his medical license and had been sworn in, Bönninghausen could start practising in Münster. As one of thirty-four physicians, he devoted himself to the needs of the sick there, working at first as his father’s assistant rather than setting up his own practice.

Bönninghausen had come into contact with homeopathy at an early age: his father had treated him from childhood with globules and tinctures. Nothing is known about his motivation for taking up medicine. One of his brothers also chose to become a homeopathic physician, but did not practise in Münster. It was probably Clemens von Bönninghausen himself who introduced his two sons to Hahnemann’s doctrine. Both adopted their father’s approach to drug administration. This is remarkable in that Clemens von Bönninghausen favoured the high...