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LSH 391.01: Placebo - The Power of Words

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LSH 391
Placebo: The Power of Words

Once thought of as a trick the doctor pulled out of his bag, the placebo effect is coming to be regarded as something more than a deception. Now understood to be potentially present in every medical proceeding, the placebo effect is in fact changing the understanding of medical efficacy, and some hold out the hope that it will transform clinical practice. Amidst all this, it has become clear that the words used by doctors and nurses have therapeutic import in and of themselves. The placebo effect is a medical application of the principle that *words matter*. Writes Irving Kirsch of the subjects in placebo experiments, “It all depends on what the person is told” (p 124).

Situated at the crossroads of medicine and the humanities, this course will look into the changing reputation of the placebo effect, with special attention to the power of words to induce therapeutic—or counter-therapeutic—effects. The course presumes an interest in medicine. It does not presume knowledge of biostatistics.

Be advised that the Mondaini et al. paper concerns male sexuality. If this is offensive to you, do not attend the class meeting when the paper is discussed.

Do not make decisions about your medication on the basis of information acquired in this course.

Learning Goals

Upon successful completion of the course students should be able to:

1. Understand the core bioethical principles.
2. Identify how the use of placebos both in experiments and in medical practice implicates the core principles of autonomy and informed consent;
3. Evaluate, on the basis of the evidence, the possibility of using placebos without deception;
4. Evaluate, on the basis of the evidence, the case for modifying informed consent procedures to promote therapeutic outcomes; and
5. Weigh the benefits and harms (including ethical harms) of placebos and track the discussion of them in the medical literature.

Readings (in order; books shown in **bold**)

H. Beecher, “The Powerful Placebo,” *JAMA* 159 (1955): 1602-06.

- A. Branthwaite and P. Cooper, "Analgesic Effects of Branding in Treatment of Headaches," *British Medical Journal* 282 (1981): 1576-78.
- K. B. Thomas, "General Practice Consultations: Is There Any Point in Being Positive?," *British Medical Journal* 294 (1987): 1200-02.
- F. Benedetti, "How the Doctor's Words Affect the Patient's Brain," *Evaluation and the Health Professions* 25 (2002): 369-86.
- F. Benedetti et al., "When Words are Painful: Unraveling the Mechanisms of the Nocebo Effect," *Neuroscience* 147 (2007): 260-71.
- W. Häuser et al., "Nocebo Phenomena in Medicine," *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International* 109 (2012): 459-65.
- R. Hahn, "The Nocebo Phenomenon: Concept, Evidence, and Implications for Public Health," *Preventive Medicine* 26 (1997): 607-11.
- R. Ferrari, "The Biopsychosocial Model—a Tool for Rheumatologists," *Clinical Rheumatology* 14 (2000): 787-95.
- A. Shapiro and E. Shapiro, *The Powerful Placebo: From Ancient Priest to Modern Physician* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), chs. 1, 4, 5, 11.**
- F. Benedetti, *Placebo Effects: Understanding the Mechanisms in Health and Disease* (Oxford UP, 2009), chs. 2, 3, 5, 10.**
- I. Kirsch, *The Emperor's New Drugs: Exploding the Antidepressant Myth* (Basic, 2011), chs. 1, 2, 5, 6.**
- E. Loftus and J. Fries, "Informed Consent: Right or Rite?," *CA—A Journal for Clinicians* 29 (1979): 316-18.
- F. Miller and L. Colloca, "The Placebo Phenomenon and Medical Ethics: Rethinking the Relationship between Informed Consent and Risk-Benefit Assessment," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 32 (2011): 229-43.
- N. Mondaini et al., "Finasteride 5 mg and Sexual Side Effects: How Many of These are Related to a Nocebo Phenomenon?," *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 4 (2007): 1708-12.
- L. Vase et al., "The Contributions of Suggestion, Desire and Expectation to Placebo Effects in Irritable Bowel Syndrome Patients: An Empirical Investigation," *Pain* 105 (2003): 17-25.
- A. Sandler and J. Bodfish, "Open-Label Use of Placebos in the Treatment of ADHD: A Pilot Study," *Child: Care, Health and Development* 34 (2008): 104-10.
- T. Kaptchuk et al., "Placebos without Deception: A Randomized Controlled Trial in Irritable Bowel Syndrome," *PLoS One* 5 (2010): e15591.

S. Justman, "Deceit and Transparency in Placebo Research," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 86 (2013): xx-xx.

J. Howick et al., "Placebo Use in the United Kingdom: Results from a National Survey of Primary Care Practitioners," *PLoS One* 8 (2013): e58247.

Assignments

Paper 1:

Citing readings, contrast the view of the placebo effect as (a) nuisance or confounder and (b) medical resource in a paper of 1250 words or more. **Due October 9.**

Paper 2:

(a) In a paper of 1250 words or more, discuss ethical issues attached to the exploitation of the placebo effect and/or possible sacrifices of efficacy entailed by the ethical exploitation of the placebo effect. **Due December 4.**

OR

(b) In a paper of 1250 words or more, review the coverage of one of the syllabus papers in three papers in the medical literature, bringing out what the papers emphasized and what they may have missed. **Due December 4.**

Final Exam

An essay exam; take-home.

Attendance

Three missed classes are allowed, after which absences are liable to penalty.

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My Publications on the Placebo Effect

To Feel What Others Feel: Social Sources of the Placebo Effect, University of California Medical Humanities Press, 2013.

"Pills in a Pretty Box: Social Sources of the Placebo Effect," in *Talking Placebos*, ed. Amir Raz and Cory Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

"Deceit and Transparency in Placebo Research," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 86 (2013): xxx.

"Placebos in the Clinic," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 106 (2013): 208-09.

"Placebo: The Lie That Comes True?," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39 (2013): 243-48.

"To Feel What Others Feel: Two Episodes from 18th-Century Medicine," *Medical Humanities* 37 (2011): 34-37.

"The Power of Rhetoric: Two Healing Movements," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 84 (2011): 15-25.

"From Medicine to Psychotherapy: The Placebo Effect," *History of the Human Sciences* 24 (2011): 95-107.

"Lying About Placebos," *Skeptic* 16: 2 (2011): 41-44.

"Imagination's Trickery: The Discovery of the Placebo Effect," *Journal of the Historical Society* 10 (2010): 57-73.

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