LSH 391.01: Placebo - The Power of Words

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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)


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.

* My Publications on the Placebo Effect

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


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