Placebo effect in clinical practice

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Definitions

• Latin for I shall please.
• An inactive substance/preparation given to satisfy the pt’s symbolic need for drug therapy and used in controlled studies to determine the efficacy of a medicine, also a procedure with no intrinsic therapeutic value.
Definitions continue...

• A placebo is any therapeutic procedure which given deliberately to have an effect on a pt’s symptoms, but objectively without specific activity for the condition it is given for.
• The placebo must be differentiated from the placebo effect, which may or may not occur and which may be favorable or unfavorable.
• The placebo effect is defined as the changes produced by placebos.
• The placebo is also used to describe an adequate control in research.
• A placebo is some thing, which is intended to act through psychological mechanism, it is an aid to therapeutic suggestions, but the effect which it produces, may be either psychological or physical.
• Observer – oriented definitions, on the other hand, tend to be broader: “placebo” refers to that aspect of any treatment which is effective through symbolic rather than instrumental means. In this view, the placebo is “an active ingredient in practically every prescription” indeed, any thing offered with therapeutic intent may be a placebo.
• Placebo effect may also be viewed as a subset of a larger group of mind-brain-body effects such as the psycho-immunological effects of religious beliefs, cultural and social systems
The negative connotations of placebo

- The placebo effect is a neglected and berated asset of patient care.
- The more the doctor viewed medical practice as a scientific exercise, the more disparaging he was about placebo therapy.
More negatives

• Doctors definition tend to suggest that the placebo is an inert preparation, or form of therapy, which has little or no specific medical effect, but is given “to humor rather than cure.” Definition of this type always imply that the practitioner knowingly exploits such technique to gratify the patient.
However ......

• Even though on an official basis, the medical community disdains the use of placebo and is trying to get it out of the way so they can prove the efficacy of the therapeutic agents they use, placebos are there front and center ....
Doctors attitude toward placebo (Jean Comaroff)

• Dr A “I would say that I prescribe it in 95% of my consultations. That sound high, it is high, not all these of the prescriptions are warranted in medical terms. When people go to doctors they expect a prescription, even if given Aspirin it would have therapeutic value. You can’t always call this placebo, I would say the placebo effect was 50%, it is very important that everybody get a prescription, most of the thing I give have therapeutic effect of some kind. But for some of them it’s the placebo effect rather than the therapeutic effect that is more important.”
Others are beginning to recognize that there is something to it.

• Too many studies have found objective health improvements from placebo to support the notion that the placebo effect is not entirely psychological.
How big is placebo effect

• In 15 studies involving 1082 pts, placebos were found to have an average significant effectiveness of about 35%, a degree not widely recognized.
• About 75% of the apparent efficacy of antidepressants may be attributable to placebo effect.
• Wolf and Pinsky (1954) found that 30% of 31 anxiety patients improved on placebo(lactose).
How big is the placebo effect...

• In 1946 DuBois stated “although scarcely mentioned in the medical literature, placebo is more used than any other class of drugs.
• Many effective drugs have power only a little greater than that of placebo.
• Many of the drugs have been extolled on the basis of clinical impression when the only power they have is the placebo effect.
• In recent years in a lot of studies done by drug companies, sugar pills have done as well as or better than antidepressants.
A study of 500 patients undergoing dental procedures, those who were given placebo injection and reassured that it would relieve their pain had the least discomfort – not only less than the patients who got placebo and were told nothing but also less than the patients who got a real anesthetic without any reassuring comment that it would work.
How big is the placebo effect ...

- The world average of for placebo effect in peptic ulcer studies is about 36%, results in USA is close to this, in Germany about 59% but 22% in Denmark and the Netherlands, and in Brazil only 7%.
What part of an active drug effect is real

- The placebo effect of active drug is masked by their active effects. The power attributed to Morphine is then presumably a placebo effect plus its drug effect. The total drug effect is equal to its active effect plus its placebo effect.
- Of a group of severe postoperative pain 75% are satisfactorily relieved by large doses of Morphine, but 35% are relieved by placebo.
- What counts more in reality is what is going in the brain/mind, not the pharmacological effect.
It may be hard to tell how much of the effect is “real”

- In their studies in the University of British Columbia, researchers found that comparable levels of Dopamine are released in the brain after an injection of either a drug or a placebo if the patient expects to get the drug.
- In one blind study, researchers found that patients with Parkinson’s disease who were given placebo released Dopamine in their brain, just like those who were given active drug.
Patterns of discovery

• Three phases:
  1 – It’s new. It’ll cure every thing. And of course there are no side effects.
  2 – Oooops! Maybe we were wrong. The honeymoon is over.
  3 – Is it actually better than any thing we have? Is it actually better than placebo.
Patterns of discovery.....

• Honigfeld show that drs communicate a subtle enthusiasm to pts in clinical trials and clinical situation.
• Many temporarily successful new surgical procedures owe their success to placebo effect alone.
• In a recent study in arthroscopic knee surgery, matched against sham surgery, 2 yrs later 35% of pts said they felt less pain, whether they were operated upon or not.
Changes in Medicine

- Medical science has improved so much and so fast in the last 40 yrs that it is easy, perhaps, for drs to neglect the part of medicine that is not a science at all.
- The ready and lavish display of sympathy, the laying on of hands, the projection of a slightly mystical authority, are now more often the province of alternative medical practitioners.
Important factors in placebo effect

• The placebo effect seems to be derived from a combination of factors involving the pt. the Dr and the relationship between the two. A meaningful Dr-Pt interaction is extremely important, allowing the transfer of the pt’s concerns to an acknowledged scientist and healer, the physician.
• The physician’s beliefs in the intrinsic worth of his medicine has always rivaled that of the patient.
• The psychological state of the pt., pt’s expectation and conviction all affect his response to treatment whether active or placebo.
Factors continue...

- Physicians who have faith in the efficacy of their treatments allow that enthusiasm to be communicated, have strong expectations, and are self-confident and attentive are the most successful in producing positive placebo effect.
- The length of time spent with the pt. and the demeanor of the physician are pertinent factors.
Thank you