
*Cabinet of Medical
Curiosities*

The Placebo: Can believing in a cure make it work?

The placebo -- Latin for "I shall please" -- was born of an urge to placate peevish or malingering patients. In an era before modern medicine, doctors resorted to inert nostrums when they realized that the mere power of suggestion was often enough to make patients feel better.

An English doctor named Alexander Sutherland first described this practice in 1763, when he ridiculed a man he dubbed "Placebo" for dispensing drops from his "thumb bottle" without any "medical education of any fort" to the appreciative townspeople of Bath, England.

Placebo use boomed over the next century. In 1807, Thomas Jefferson described doctors' use of bread pills, colored water and hickory ash to treat patients as a "pious fraud." By the 1817, Quincy's "Lexicon-Medicum," a medical dictionary published in Philadelphia, defined "placebo" as an "epithet given to any medicine adapted more to please than benefit the patient."



The "ideal sight restorer," Science Museum, London.

The FDA was established in 1906 to crack down on unproven cures

Hucksters and Quacks

Alas, hucksters soon exploited the placebo phenomenon in the “patent medicine” business. Quack doctors sold “miraculous elixirs” -- usually vegetable extracts laced with alcohol, cocaine, or even opium -- in traveling medicine shows as cures for everything from teething pain to cancer. Some of the more colorful patents included “Mug-Wump,” a “cure and preventive for all venereal diseases” and “Kickapoo Indian Sagwa,” advertised as a “blood, liver and stomach renovator.”

When the Food and Drug Administration was established in 1906, the agency cracked down on sham and dangerous elixirs, but some popular patent medicines survived to this day, including “Vic’s VapoRub” (established in 1890), Luden’s cough drops (1881) and Lydia Pinkam’s herbal supplements for women (1875).



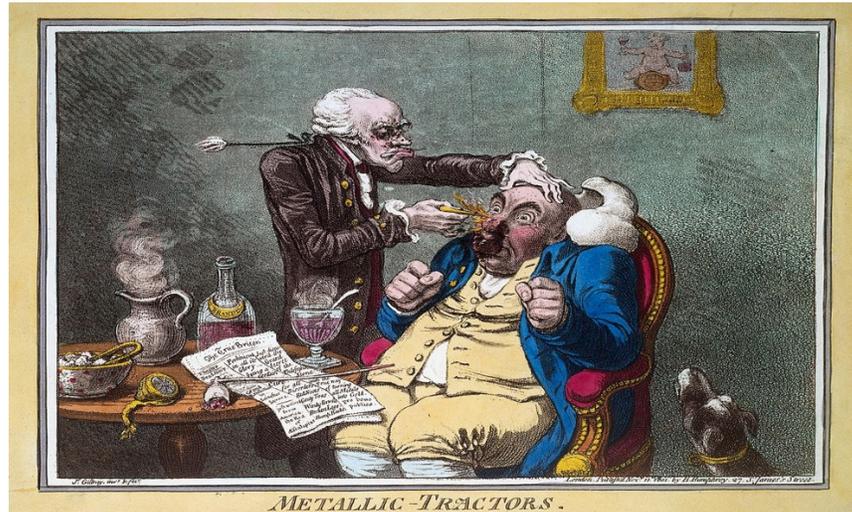
Mugwump Remedy for venereal diseases, 1870.

The Placebo Effect

One grain of wisdom that doctors collectively attained over the centuries is that a patient’s mindset can deeply affect a treatment’s outcome. In the second century, Greek physician Galen observed that he had greater success with patients who truly believed they would be cured. Today, the “placebo effect” – that feeling of wellbeing patients experience after taking a placebo – continues to mystify doctors and worry ethicists.

The placebo effect was first demonstrated in 1799 when British physician John Haygarth tested a popular quack remedy called “Perkins tractors” --- a device comprised of two three-inch metal rods that were used to “draw off the noxious

electrical fluid that lay at the root of suffering.” When Haygarth replaced the metal rods with wooden rods to treat patients suffering from rheumatism, four out of five of them said the knock-off “Perkins tractors” diminished their pain. (He published his findings in a book, “On the Imagination as a Cause and as a Cure of Disorders of the Body.”)



A quack treating a patient with *Perkins Patent Tractors* by James Gillray, 1801.

More recently, doctors have performed "placebo surgeries" for conditions ranging from osteoarthritis of the knee to Parkinson's. The patients were sedated, sliced open (to make them believe surgery had been performed) and sewn up again. In many instances, the outcome of the fake surgeries was astonishingly similar to that of the real surgeries.

But sham surgeries have been criticized by ethicists who argue that they violate the Hippocratic oath of “First do no harm.” Some doctors are also conflicted about using placebos in clinical trials -- which rely on sugar pills to test the efficacy of experimental drugs. In a 2009, Ted Kapthuk, the director of Harvard's Program in Placebo Studies, decided to come clean. In a clinical trial for patients suffering from irritable bowel syndrome, he told participants that they were taking placebos. The outcome startled him: the patients who knowingly took placebos reported experiencing relief at a nearly twice the rate of people who received *no* treatment.

Trials with "open-label" placebos have since been shown to effective in treating chronic lower back pain, allergies and even depression.

“Sugar pills will not shrink a tumor, will not lower cholesterol, don't lower hypertension. Placebo treatments will work in things like pain, insomnia, depression, anxiety, functional bowel disorders, functional urinary disorders,” Kaptchuk [said](#).



Placebo pills. Original work of the US Federal Government - public domain

Believe it or not, a new generation of elixir hustlers is now selling placebos on the Internet. “[Zeebos](#)” are advertised as “pure, honest placebos” for “symptom relief” and come with an app that allows customers to track their symptoms and the relief they feel after taking the inert pills. On Amazon, reviews are mixed – from users who say the pills don't work to others who says the placebos helped them cut their cigarette use or relieved a “chronic sweaty thigh” problem.