

## No 5 THE PLACEBO EFFECT

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1. This morning, I thought it might be useful to say something about "*the placebo effect.*" We hear it referred to a lot, especially in relation to alternative therapies.
2. It is sometimes used in a very dismissive way as though it is some completely unreal effect. You hear people say "*It's all in the mind,*" or "*It's only the placebo effect*" as though that gets rid of the matter.
3. In fact, the placebo effect is very real and very interesting and is beginning to get increasing serious scientific attention. And for those of us who believe in the psycho-physical unity of the individual, the placebo effect is very nice example of that unity in action.
4. A very nice source book on the subject is called *Meaning, medicine, and the placebo effect* by Daniel Moerman and was published by the Cambridge University Press in 2002. Moerman is an anthropologist and has been studying the placebo effect since the mid-1970s. It is a very literate, good-humoured and generally engaging book.
5. First, what is the placebo effect? The word is Latin and is usually translated as "*I shall please*".
6. It came into use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when medical treatment was quite aggressive and painful. Bloodletting, or bleeding, was widely used and doctors used all kinds of violent purges and treatments with mercury and sulphur and other noxious substances.
7. A placebo was seen as something inert and harmless which was meant to please the patient rather than do them good. It was used when doctors could not think of anything else. They would refer to it among themselves as "*A mere placebo.*"
8. This was very much the case when I was growing up and ther modern antibiotics and other drugs had not been invented. Doctors were expected to do something and they used to make up their own bottles of medicine to give to their patients. They would use some sugar or syrup and colouring and perhaps add in a few drops of alcohol or opium which they would give people.
9. In modern medicine, a placebo is made of some substance which has no known active or noticeable effect on pain or

illness. A typical placebo pill is contains a little starch and perhaps some sugar and colouring.

10. We are talking about half a rice crispie or a bit of cornflake powdered and moulded into a pill. We can be pretty certain that if any effect is observed, it is not a result of any active ingredients in the pill. If there were, could you imagine how powerful a full bowl of cornflakes or a slice of bread would be.
11. Here are some examples of the placebo effect which Moerman mentions in his book.
12. One was in 1994 and was a trial of a new ulcer drug called Prevacid which was to be compared with the existing standard treatment called Zantac. This was what they called a Randomised Placebo Controlled Trial which is generally regarded as the very best kind of trial – it is sometime described as the gold standard.
13. The result of the trial was that 88 percent of the people who got the new drug were cured of their ulcer compared with 66 percent who got the old drug. This was rightly regarded as proof that the new drug was more effective than the old and the result and was written up in one of the refereed medical journals.
14. By a refereed journal, we mean one that circulates any paper it receives among a panel of knowledgeable experts before it considers publishing it.
15. What interested Moerman was the fact that 44 percent of the people who got the placebo were also cured. This was not mentioned in the scientific write-up. Medical scientists do not like the placebo effect.
16. Moerman mentions a variety of other trials in which placebos were used. One of the most interesting ones was in Italy in which groups of men and women were given different colours of placebos but were told they were sleeping pills.
17. The researchers found that orange placebos had very little effect but that blue ones were very effective. The problem was that the blue ones sent women to sleep but made the men more wakeful.
18. The only explanation which seemed to make any sense was that blue is the colour of the Madonna and is consoling to women. It is also the colour of the national football team which

is anything but consoling to men since they worry so much about it.

19. So here we have a placebo, which because it is made of a very small amount of an inert substance could not have any effect, actually causing the opposite effect in Italian men and women.
20. Various scientific groups have carried out all kinds of experiments to see if they can tease out what is happening. Some blood pressure drug trials in Australia found that all groups, whether placebo or drugs, showed reductions – including those who received no treatments but simply had their blood pressure measured.
21. Having your blood pressure measured can reduce it. Except that there are plenty of cases where getting your blood pressure measured can increase it.
22. They also found that the attitude of the doctor could have a major effect. In one case, there was a standard drug treatment for angina pectoris – the heart problem which causes severe pain – which was used for years by doctors in the 1940s and 1950s. This was generally found to be highly effective in relieving the pain in this very serious and often fatal condition.
23. But later research, using placebos, questioned the effectiveness of these angina drugs and doctors became more sceptical about them. As this scepticism spread, it was found that the effectiveness of these drugs fell by half down to a baseline of 30-40 percent – which was the same as the placebo effect.
24. The only thing that had changed was that the doctors had become more sceptical about the efficacy of these drugs. As Moerman puts it, “...*in these grave conditions, skeptics can heal 30% to 40% of their patients with inert medication, while enthusiasts can heal 70% to 90%.*”<sup>1</sup>
25. In some trials of acupuncture, people who were given acupuncture for nausea and vomiting after surgery showed a positive response only when they knew they were getting it. If they were given it before they recovered consciousness, it had no effect.

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<sup>1</sup> Moerman (2002)p39

26. In an even more complex study done in France,<sup>2</sup> some patients suffering from cancer pain were divided into two groups. The first were subjected to a standard medical trial in which some were given a painkiller called naxopren and others a placebo. This trial showed that the painkiller worked better than the placebo.
27. But then the researchers talked to the other group of patients about the trials and explained that some would be getting painkillers and some would be getting placebos. The really curious thing was that though the naxopren worked better than the placebo in this group also, both the naxopren and the placebo worked better than in the group where the trial had not been discussed. In fact, the placebo worked better in the informed patients than the naxopren did in the uninformed patients.
28. As Moerman puts it
- In this case, a discussion about the fact of getting drugs, and even the possibility of getting an inert drug, increased the effectiveness of both the drug and the placebo. Knowing what's going on, experiencing treatment both physically and verbally, makes a difference.<sup>3</sup>*
29. Getting even more complex was the unconscious advertisement for the placebo in the advertisement that some of you will remember from the 1980s which said “*Nothing acts faster than an Anadin.*”
30. And, of course, if you give a placebo to somebody without them knowing it, slipping a piece of powdered cornflake into their dinner without telling them, there will obviously be no effect.
31. As Moerman puts it
- Placebo treatment can dramatically reduce pain compared to no treatment, but only if the subjects know it is happening. It is not the placebo itself that reduces the pain, which makes perfect sense since it is inert. It is the knowledge of the placebo that does the trick.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p71

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p72

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p106

32. I could go on giving examples but I have said enough to make you think there is something really odd going on with the placebo effect.
33. Drug companies hate it and so do most scientists because they cannot get any firm grasp of what is happening.
34. Moerman proposes the theory that the meaning we attribute to medical things has a major bearing on how they affect us. I think there is a great deal to it. But it is a long way from a satisfactory physiological explanation.
35. I certainly do not have an answer. I suspect there is an element of muscular release involved when one is worried and in pain and you find that something is being done about it by someone who appears kind and competent.
36. In that case, the placebo effect is tapping into what we are more directly and reliably achieving with the classic Alexander Technique procedures. What Walter described as creating the conditions in which the autonomic system can do its job properly.
37. This also ties up with some of Ruth's thoughts about the universality of Alexander's discoveries. He was getting close to some very basic truths about the nature of humanity.
38. There is obviously a lot more to be thought about in this area and I certainly hope to come back to it another time.

MOERMAN, D. (2002) *Meaning, medicine and the placebo effect* - Cambridge University Press, Cambridge