

6.3 Self-Fulfilling/Self-Defeating (p. 147)

Doctors Lie

A PLACEBO IS A pill that has no pharmacological effect. Placebos are often prescribed by doctors, especially when they think that the patient's condition is being caused or worsened by anxiety, and when there's no suitable actual drug (or other treatment) available. Your belief that the placebo will work actually can result in a medical improvement. "Try this," they say, "we're confident it will help." They don't tell you that it is a placebo—they don't want you to know, because then it wouldn't work.

Ruling out the "placebo effect"—improvement of a medical condition resulting not from the chemistry of a drug, but merely from the patient's belief that something effective is being done—is essential to the testing of drugs. That's why tests have to compare the results of taking the drug with taking a placebo.

The ethics of placebo use are somewhat questionable. The doctor is, in effect, lying to the patient when prescribing a placebo. It's for the patient's good, of course, but is lying okay, then? A further ethically questionable feature is that for a pill to be really convincingly therapeutic, it should probably be pretty damned expensive. So they're going to charge big bucks for a pill that's just made out of sugar and costs next to nothing to make.

Placebo use in drug testing faces the same problem. You're not supposed to lie to the subjects of medical experiments, but it's essential that they not be aware of whether they're being treated by the drug being tested or by a placebo. A compromise solution here is to tell all subjects that they will receive either the drug or the placebo, and won't know which. That's true anyway.

The Metaplacebo

I ENCOUNTERED AN INTERESTINGLY complex violation of the general rule that patients are not told that an administered drug is a placebo. I was having a lot of trouble getting down to writing my thesis—a task that causes anxiety, sometimes debilitating—in many graduate students. So my doctor said he'd write me a prescription for a tranquilizer I should take 15 minutes before sitting down to write.

"My body is a temple!" I objected (or something to that effect). "I don't want it polluted by evil chemicals!"

"Don't worry," he said. "This is such a low dose that it will have no chemical effect at all on you. It's just a placebo."

"Just a placebo? How can it work if you've told me that it's a placebo?"

“But it will. Trust me. Just try, and you’ll see.”

So I tried it. It worked.

Doctor Schmarker

SOME OF PHYSICIANS’ POWER to cure comes from the placebo effect—the expectation that what they’re doing will help. That explains to some extent the special uniform, equipment, manner, and general aura of authority—and the title “Doctor” (instead of just “hey you”)—that physicians effect. Well, it works, so....

Fake doctors—PhDs—are also entitled to be called “Doctor,” but watch out when they insist on this. Years ago, when I was chair of the philosophy department, I had to go see a minor university bureaucrat. I walked into his office and told the secretary, “I have an appointment with Mr. Schmarker [name slightly disguised] at 2.” The secretary said, “Have a seat; **DOCTOR** Schmarker will see you shortly.” I wondered why he got her to insist on this, and later looked the guy up in the university catalogue, which listed everyone’s degrees. As I suspected, his doctorate was honorary. When a PhD insists on being called “Doctor,” ask yourself why.