

Placebo Side Effects

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Definition of placebo from Shapiro & Shapiro: “A placebo is any therapy (or that component of any therapy) that is intentionally or knowingly used for its nonspecific, psychological, or psychophysiological, therapeutic effect, or that is used for a presumed specific therapeutic effect on a patient, symptom, or illness but is without specific activity for the condition being treated.” - A.K.Shapiro, E.Shapiro, 1997

Without placebo, medicine wouldn't have been very effective in the past. Indeed also in the present, a big part of what people experience from healthcare comes from placebo. This is the case for regular medicine and probably (much) more for 'alternative medicines' (CAM) where scientific proof is hardly showing any non-placebo mediated effect.

One can say: “If it's placebo, why not use it as such. We can look at it as an instrument to reach and kindle the 'inner strength' of people, in the best case even without the side-effects of most regular medications. Moreover, in many instances it's cheaper and sometimes: at least we can give something instead of nothing.” This is a very valid position if there are no *huge* side effects of placebo.

In this text I play the role of devil's advocate in discussing side effects of placebo. I try to be extensive. After hearing my plea, the placebo's advocate may respond at any time. Of course, I am not only this advocate. These arguments are also arguments pro : looking beyond placebo,, providing the underlying power in a more open and meaningful way.

My arguments are:

- **Placebo has little or no positive effect in the long run.**

Take the case of dieting. We know that in almost all cases diets don't work in the long run. On the contrary, simply dieting in many cases results in putting on *more* weight.

The more general principle is that when a deeper problem's so-called solution is too 'superficial', it doesn't carry its effect in the long run.

The same for placebo in that, to the extent that it 'reaches deeper', it does so only in a pinpoint fashion. It thus cannot be more than symptomatic (diminishing symptoms, not causes), which sometimes is good, many times less good. With the cause remaining, sooner or later the negative condition returns in the same guise or another. Which brings us to:

- **Placebo negates the symptom as a call-for-action.**

A symptom can be seen as a kind of 'communication'. The acute pain of a hand too close to a heat source is a 'communication' from your body to pull back your hand. A chronic pain (in most cases psychosomatic) carries a different kind of 'communication'. It is a call-for-attention to deeper-lying issues.

This is no plea to go back to the ages of psycho-analytics. To deeply-dig-into has proven itself not to be useful. It is however a plea for a deep kind of attention. Placebo carries nothing of this attention. On the contrary, it points attention to the other side. This is actually very aggressive, like turning one's back to a desperate child crying in need. I plead 'guilty by neglect' for this.

- **Placebo in reverse: the nocebo effect**

The 'nocebo' has been amply investigated and is as real as placebo. People who expect side-effects, will also experience them. The mechanism is the same as placebo. For instance, people who expect a 'dip before getting better' do so, even if the product they take is a pure placebo.

- **Placebo makes people dependent.**

This is in fact 'medicalisation' in a negative sense. People become dependent on 'things outside'. Next time they automatically grab for that. They teach their children and others to do the same.

Such dependence cannot be a good thing. It diminishes choice, free will. It is in fact a vicious circle in which people can get deeply caught.

- **Placebo diminishes empathy.**

Empathy and placebo may go together in one consultation. But they are very different concepts, the one depending on optimum openness, the other on a lack of openness.

Placebo diminishes empathy by making it harder for the practitioner to 'look at the patient as he really is'. Moreover, if the practitioner is knowledgeable about placebo (or becomes so more and more in the course of time) and the patient is not (by definition because otherwise the placebo doesn't work), this creates a situation of no complete openness. If the patient after some time gets to know that the physician has knowingly deceived him, trust and empathy may have gone forever.

Communication between practitioner and patient is established through much more than only words. The 'deceit' (and even disdain for the patient as 'gullible placebo responder') of the practitioner plays a role even if both consciously don't know how.

Admittedly, placebo can make a consultation possible in which empathy can then play a role. But this works both ways: it makes less placebo-oriented consultations less possible instead.

- **Placebo is not the truth.**

To many people, truth matters very much. Especially on the domain of health(care). This is a 'moral stance', therefore not directly about money. People who are ignorant now, may become disappointed when knowledgeable.

Physicians like the idea of 'being truthful' to their patients. Indeed this is an argument of many against the use of placebo even if no other side effects are considered.

We are very rightfully progressing ever more towards a culture of 'informed consent'. Healthcare practitioners are more and more legally bound to 'tell the truth'. In the future,

placebo issues may well become legal ones. With real advocates pointing to this untruthfulness and other side effects.

- **Placebo carries a message of anti-science.**

When many medical scientists say something is nonsense and other 'scientific people' depend on it for their livelihood, people lose faith in medical science itself, or develop the same attitude towards it as towards any kind of magic. This dire situation is not what scientific medicine deserves. In fact, 200 years ago, scientific medicine mainly developed as a way out of the magic of those days.

We seem to witness in the minds of many people another swing of the pendulum, towards 'magic'. This does make people more vulnerable to *all kinds* of magic, even of the worst kind (as one can see in the present-day surge of religious horror).

- **Placebo leads to a growing 'clash with rationality/science'**

Only truth lasts forever. In the end, there is no doubt that science will 'win this battle'. In the meantime, forecasts are that there will be a battle. Actually, there already is for quite a while. Many people (patients) will be crushed in this. Maybe they won't be seen in the streets, but rather in hospitals, homes, their own backrooms...

In all kinds of situations, one can see instances of this: believers (who need their belief in order for it to work) versus non-believers (who think the others to be foolish), tearing conversations and friendships apart, or making people shut up.

- **Placebo carries a message of 'solving my health problem is or should be very easy'**

People get lazy by this. They depend on the idea that their problems will be solved easily without their need to really take *personal* action, to look at themselves. They sadly lose their sense of responsibility (which is not the same as guilt!).

This makes people more and more prone to become sacrifice of any charlatans wanting (lots of) easy money and status at the detriment of those they pretend to help. The fact that people may temporarily 'feel good' at this, is no excuse.

- **Placebo is a major cause of psychosomatics, depression...**

This is a stark statement but it naturally flows from what is already said. Ignoring the 'deeper layers of mind/body' is itself the reason why the communication from this side becomes harder and harder. Just as: when you don't pull back your burnt hand, it will hurt even more. Then it will not hurt anymore (your nerves are dead) but the consequences will be even much worse. With psychosomatic pain (or other symptom) it's just the same principle. Scientifically, we don't know how far this goes. It might well go *really very far*.

When the 'solution' is itself a main cause, in any case we have a serious issue. The fire will burn until all the wood is consumed. There is much reason to suspect an overly reliance on placebo to be one of the main causes of the present-day surge in psyche-related health problems.

- **Placebo makes a number of people build up a profession with no future.**

In some cases of 'placebo-based medicine' (PBM, as one might call them), studies to become a health care professional are hard. Much has to be learned that actually, from many others' viewpoints, doesn't make any sense...

Then these people build up a career, livelihood, status, circle of friends, colleagues, patients...

In order then (science growing ever stronger) to tell them that they were wrong, that they should stop, that their life has been based on... 'placebo'... Who will tell them "I already knew this when you started"?

This argument is to me *also* a very important one!

- **Placebo is NOT cost-efficient**

Since real causes remain without solution, the resulting problems keep demanding loads of money. Psychosomatic problems are generally much costlier in repeated examinations, therapies, work disability... Placebo may look cost-efficient, but is probably the most costly element of present-day healthcare.

- **Placebo does not respect the individual as a total person.**

A question of respect. People are VERY sensitive to this. At present, the idea of placebo as token of disrespect is seldom heard. If one talks to anyone about this (or in a lecture, to the public), one immediately gets full attention. People become animated. They very much dislike the idea of not being respected as total persons. Efforts to get beyond placebo then suddenly become worthwhile.

- **Placebo diminishes scientific progress.**

It diminishes the political drive to invest in medical science. People need a negative drive (pain, other symptoms) in order to call for the development of solutions. (OK. I'm an advocate. I'm trying everything now...)

- **Placebo may be carried by a vehicle with material side effects.**

This is in a strict sense not a direct side effect of placebo itself of course. It is nevertheless a further consequence of it.

- **Placebo may make a 'real disease' being undiagnosed and not treated well.**

People who have fewer symptoms through this (or have more symptoms but rely on placebo for short-run relief), are less inclined to consult a physician. This is of course not so much a side effect of placebo, as it is a side effect of 'symptomatic medicine' in general. One needs to be careful in all cases.

- **Placebo has negative cultural consequences**

Ignoring the 'deeper layers of oneself' is aggressive at an individual level but also at a cultural level. Placebo, when used by many, leads to dissociation (loss of contact with oneself) at the cultural level. According to Jung (famous Swiss psychiatrist, †1961), this was the main cause for wars, discrimination, xenophobia... I agree and think it still is.

This makes one's decision about how to handle one's symptoms a very moral choice, not only for oneself but for a much broader perspective.

Finally please note (again): this is a plea for openness. Openness is a worthy cause because of people. These arguments point to the fact that people really do get hurt by closedness. Some can also get hurt by suddenly being forced into openness without appropriate support. Let's not wait until circumstances make us do so.

I rest my case.