



## Patients Give the Green Light for Placebos

Patients are more open to the use of placebos than many clinicians may think, sometimes even more open than the clinicians are, according to researchers from the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland; Kaiser Permanente Northern California in Oakland; and Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts. However, patients value most the honesty and trust displayed by the physician in the prescription of placebo treatments.

Debates flourish about the ethical considerations of using placebos, even though many clinicians use them regularly, say the researchers. But they add that the voices of U.S. patients have been largely missing from the debates, although studies in other countries have included patients' opinions.

To find out what patients in the U.S. think about placebos, the researchers surveyed 853 adult members of a large California health plan. Many of the respondents were highly educated ( $\geq 44\%$  were college graduates), had health insurance, and had seen a physician in the past 6 months for a chronic condition, which may not represent the U.S. as a whole, the researchers note.

The researchers asked respondents about their beliefs regarding the con-

nection between mind, body, and illness, and their knowledge of placebo and the placebo effect. They also asked respondents about their beliefs about the acceptability of doctors recommending placebo treatments to patients. The researchers used both general questions and scenarios that varied the nature of the placebo treatment, the treatment indication, and the manner in which the physician described the treatment to the patient. For instance, in one scenario a 45-year-old man has been having moderate stomach pains; although the cause is not clear, the condition is not serious. Two versions of this first scenario were presented according to whether the patient was aware that the doctor was recommending a placebo. In a second scenario, a 28-year-old woman goes to her doctor because of cold symptoms; she asks him for antibiotics. Nearly all survey respondents believed that the mind can affect health, and two-thirds of respondents of the first scenario said they would probably or definitely be willing to take the treatment even if they knew the treatment was intended to relieve pain through the mind-body self-healing process.

About two-thirds of all respondents believed that placebo treatments can produce physical changes in the body, but most (over 80%) also believed that placebo treatment can be effective only if patients don't

know they're receiving a placebo and trust their physicians. However, in response to a third scenario about patients who were told a placebo could relieve pain through mind-body self-healing, 64% of respondents thought such a treatment might work even when the patient knew about it.

Feelings were mixed about whether the physician should tell the patient about the placebo, a finding the researchers say has not been reported in previous surveys. Most respondents said it was acceptable for doctors to recommend placebo treatments, but honesty and trust played a big part in responses. Generally speaking, survey respondents felt the physician should tell the truth when asked, but need not necessarily volunteer the information. Still, when presented the second scenario in which a patient asked directly for cold medicine, respondents were twice as likely to feel that finding out the treatment was a placebo would negatively affect the patient's trust in her doctor, even if the treatment worked.

Because many survey respondents seemed comfortable with the idea of placebo treatments, the researchers suggest that physicians should consider engaging with their patients to discuss the subject. ●

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