PLACEBO: A TRUE MEDICINE OR NOT
by Shane M. Senobio

How could something as inert and harmless as a sugar pill relieve a person’s pain or hasten his recovery just by the expectation that it would?

Placebo! That’s how powerful placebo can be. Placebo (meaning ‘to please’) is by definition a self-satisfying experience.

Placebos have typically been identified as inert agents or procedures aimed at pleasing the patient rather than exerting a specific effect. According to dictionary, it is a harmless pill, medicine, or procedure prescribed more for the psychological benefit to the patient than for any physiological effect. It is somehow used to trick the person of having the necessary medicine (that maybe a bad side effect to the body) in order for the person to perceive that he is being treated thus giving hope that he will be cured. Placebos are drugs that are physically and pharmacologically inert, without any direct therapeutic effects.

But how does it really work? The placebo response is a set of complex psycho-neurobiological mechanisms; it is believed that verbal suggestions and conditioning cues can recruit simple forms of memory capable of triggering multiple types of responses. Medicines have used placebos as a methodological tool to challenge, debunk, and discard ineffective and harmful treatments. But placebo effects are another story; they are not bogus. With proper controls for spontaneous remission and regression to the mean, placebo studies use placebos to elucidate and quantify the clinical, psychological, and biological effects of immersion in a clinical environment. These are pills or capsules that look identical to the allegedly active drug, but contain only an inert substance like milk sugar. Depression, anxiety disorders, and pain are kinds of ailments that are amenable to placebo treatment. Pain is particular is highly responsive to placebo therapy. The kinds of effects you see in the brain when people respond to a placebo depends on the condition you’re supposed to be treating.

Of course, placebo effects are modest as compared with the impressive results achieved by lifesaving surgery and powerful, well-targeted medications. Yet we believe such effects are at the core of what makes medicine a healing profession.

This is how powerful placebo can be!
References:
