

FURTHER BOOK OF NOTE

The Placebo: A Reader edited by Franklin G. Miller, Luana Colloca, Robert A. Crouch, and Ted J. Kaptchuk. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 327 pp. \$49.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4214-0866-8.

This volume illustrates the serious interest that mainstream medicine has begun to take in the placebo effect; two of the editors are at the National Institutes of Health and one of the others heads a Program in Placebo Studies and the Therapeutic Encounter (at Harvard Medical School).

Placebo should also be of high interest for Scientific Explorers, because it is so directly involved with questions of consciousness and because it is also highly mysterious, perhaps as mysterious as some “psychic” phenomena.

This book is a *reader*, a collection of salient articles with minimal introductory material.

Part I, on the concept and significance of placebo, includes the seminal paper of 1955 by Henry Beecher in *JAMA* that is credited with making placebo “a central feature of general medical knowledge.” But it was an earlier (1950) paper by S. Wolf that made the remarkable claim that placebo could “include objective changes at the end organ which may exceed those attributable to potent pharmacological action.”

Part II surveys experimental studies. It remains an open question, how universally placebo is experienced. Some observations show that conditioning in animals can simulate placebo effects. With humans, mere suggestion and expectancy work—and placebo can modify (add to or subtract from) drug effects.

Placebo can be effective even when patients are told that placebo is being administered—perhaps because they don’t believe it? In some studies, placebo produces similar brain changes as do opioids; perhaps placebo involves release of endogenous opioids. Other studies have reported activation of the hormone cholecystokinin and the neurotransmitter (and hormone) dopamine.

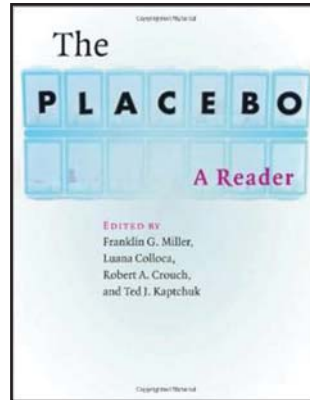
One knotty problem in experimental studies: how to compare placebo with “no treatment”? How to enroll and monitor in a study a control group that doesn’t know it’s a control group?

Part III considers ethical issues related to placebo. Since placebo is

often at least as effective (statistically) as other treatments (drugs or psychotherapy), is it ethical for doctors to use placebo and in doing so deceive their patients? Is it ethical to conduct clinical trials with placebo controls?

Research on placebo frequently mandates some degree of deception and transgression of the usual requirement for informed consent.

Trying to understand placebo offers challenges akin in some ways to the challenges of trying to make sense of scientific anomalies, most directly psychic phenomena.



HENRY H. BAUER

Professor Emeritus of Chemistry & Science Studies, Dean Emeritus of Arts & Sciences
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
hhbauer@vt.edu, www.henrybauer.homestead.com