

## THE PLACE OF PLACEBO IN MODERN MEDICINE

DR. A. C. GORDON ROSS

Placebo is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as a medicine given to please rather than to benefit the patient. This is not a good definition, for many placebos are given with benefit for the simple reason that the patient has got into the habit of taking medicines.

He feels he is neglecting his health if he is not taking something and he has a childlike faith in the efficacy of any medicine. And the very fact that he is taking pills does him good.

Homœopaths believe in the minimum amount of medicine given to get a reaction in the patient, and they never repeat a medicine as long as the patient's symptoms show improvement. This is fundamental, and as long as the patient's symptoms show improvement he is liable to get placebo until the prescriber feels he sees clearly the need for another remedy called for by the presenting symptoms.

I should have thought this was elemental common sense. But what can one say to a distinguished member of the Faculty of Medicine of Glasgow to whom some years ago I gave a lift in my car? He was going in my direction so he put his attaché case in the back seat beside my own and we motored along talking of this and that until he got to his destination, where he hurriedly grabbed his case and departed.

### WRONG CASE TAKEN

Unfortunately he took the wrong case but I noticed his error just after he left and went after him and put the matter right. He thanked me and said: "I am glad you discovered the mistake in time for I am giving a demonstration to my students and it would hardly have done if I had opened my case and found it full of sugar."

"Sugar," I said, somewhat taken aback. He replied: "Yes, of course it is sugar. It looks like sugar, it tastes like sugar so therefore I reckon all your medicines are the same." I told him that there were none so blind as those who would not see, which I considered appropriate, as he was an ophthalmologist.

Since this incident I have read many articles on placebos and the consensus of opinion is that they still have a place in modern medicine, especially among practitioners of long experience.

Here we have the crux of the matter. Many years ago I knew of an old man who practised in Lancashire. At the crack of dawn his surgery was filled with noisy mill girls in their clogs. The old doctor would wait till fifty were assembled when he would appear dramatically at the surgery door. "Hands up all the chests." He would count the hands. Then he would shout into the dispensary. "Eighteen pink bottles."

He would then proceed to the stomachs and order green bottles. But he would stand at his surgery door carefully watching the girls go out for their early start and here and there would ask one to return in the evening. He knew the face of disease and he rarely missed a diagnosis.

Latterly, however, his son was taken on as his assistant and many of the patients preferred his more dramatic investigations to the father's so-called masterly inactivity. It is recorded that one afternoon the surgery was full of more stylish patients who wanted the younger man, though his father was conducting the surgery.

After about an hour's wait the old man appeared at the door in his hat and coat. "I am off on my evening round. I suppose you will all be waiting for young Dr. John? Well, he is off to Blackpool for a fortnight, so you can all come back when he returns." With that he got into his dogcart and drove off . . .

#### LONDON DISCUSSION

In 1951 there was a discussion in London under the heading Medication in General Practice and in the course of the meeting a lot was said about the value of placebos in modern

treatment. One doctor doubted their value and recommended that the patients be given advice rather than medicine.

Another said he used placebo only for mild anxiety states as he believed a bottle of medicine was a tangible reminder of the doctor's presence and advice. Another speaker disagreed with this. He believed a placebo could perpetuate or even create an obsession.

Another said he always gave sedatives where a placebo seemed indicated. Yet another thought the true use of a placebo was to cut short a consultation with an argumentative or unintelligent patient.

The American Dr. Beecher did a lot of work in making an analysis of 15 placebo investigations where more than 1,000 patients were involved. He produced a chart showing that 35 per cent. of such placebo-taking patients responded favourably in such conditions as headaches, angina, seasickness, hay-fever and the common cold, anxiety and tension.

Dr. Lasagna, also working in America, found that placebo-reactive patients were those who suffered from nervous stomach and were partial to drugs of the aspirin type. They tended to be more emotionally expressive, to speak freely, especially of themselves, and, curiously enough, they were all regular church-goers. Lasagna describes their personalities as being more anxious, more self-centred and more emotionally labile and to be more dependent on outside stimulation than on their own emotional processes.

I called this article *The Place of Placebo in Modern Medicine*, and the time has come to assess that place. I think it all depends on how one regards medicine, as an art or as a science.

Young doctors, nurtured on the science of medicine and the gospel of mass medication, have little use for placebos, consequently the drug bill goes up and up and the patient, like *Oliver Twist*, asks for more and more. But he who regards medicine as an art uses placebo when he is not certain of the remedy, when he knows the patient is improving under a slow-acting remedy, when he wants to wait and see,

## EFFECT ON DACHSHUND

Placebos have a very real use and let me illustrate by a true story of my two little bitches, a poodle and a dachshund. One glorious day last summer the poodle strayed and was knocked down by a fast travelling car. No one would have given much for her chances.

But Zoë got ARNICA for shock, CALENDULA for her cuts, BELLIS for her bruised abdomen and CAUSTICUM for the paralysis of her hind legs. My wife nursed her for 10 days in a hotel, but we were worried also about the dachshund, Lotta, who started to pine on the second day until she got a placebo powder every time Zoë got her medicine. In no time she was herself again, and was encouraging her friend to try to walk, which she did eventually.

I suppose the professor I mentioned earlier would say that the whole thing was faith. But can faith cure paralysed legs or small babies with whom most homœpaths have dramatic results? These results are easier to obtain when we are working with patients whose bodies are not full of all sorts of medicines, some of which soften the heart muscle, reduce the vitality or cause side effects which are worse than the disease they are supposed to help.

—*Homœopathy, March 1960.*