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Research Question- How do the ethical and legal implications of a doctor’s prescribing placebo treatment relate to its medical effectiveness?

Annotated Bibliography


Brody presents an interesting argument here that deception need not play a role in the use of a placebo treatment. He believes this diffuses the ethical situation created by this type of treatment. Brody also presents background on the issue, as well as the traditional arguments over the ethics of placebo prescription. He clearly presents the pros and cons of each way of thinking.


Brown focused on the true scientific aspects of the placebo effect and how it is studied. This article provides in-depth information of what types of illnesses might respond positively to a placebo treatment and which might not. He also emphasizes that simply seeing a doctor and having your condition/illness legitimized in itself has a placebo effect, and also the effect of expectations on a patient’s responses. This would be a good source of information about specific case studies and statistics, as well as a general overview of the placebo effect.


Harris focuses on a new study that just came out suggesting over half of all doctors routinely prescribe placebos to their patients. However, these placebos were not sugar pills, but rather relatively inert pharmaceuticals that were prescribed for their benefit on a patient’s mindset, not their body. This is a good article because it reflects the interest in popular culture about the topic and gives many perspectives on the issue.


Kapp focuses on the legal and ethical ramifications of placebo prescriptions. He points out that there are four main legal/ethical problems that could arise, but also counters each one. Kapp also mentions that adverse placebo effects do occur, and that this plays a significant role in the debate over placebo prescription. This article gives a legal perspective that is unique from most of the other literature in existence.


Lapierre is writing here in response the Tri-Council Working Groups recent condemnation of the use of placebos in clinical trials. She presents evidence that a placebo is not “simply no treatment.” Lapierre does stress
the importance, however, of participant consent to the guidelines of the trial. This is good source for information regarding clinical trials and placebo usage. One must take into account that Lapierre’s article is an editorial.


Chapter 9 had the mass of information about the placebo response. Melmed focused mostly on the power of the mind; more specifically the effect of anticipation and enthusiasm on the body. He also talks about the ethical implications of using placebo treatments in studying diseases that may have a proven alternative. This chapter shows that the mind body connection is strong and has the power to seriously alter behavior.


Nordenberg chronicles the history of placebo use and the studies involving them, providing good background knowledge. He also closely examines the issue of deception in the prescription of placebo. Nordenberg’s article is a good starting point for general facts and debate over placebos and their effects. He presents both sides of the issue fairly.


Talbot focuses on the power of the connection between one’s mind and body. She uses several interesting examples to make her point, including descriptions of false, or “placebo,” surgeries. This gave the article an interesting aspect because she used to describe how the bigger the perceived effect/measure, the greater the placebo effect experienced. This article gives strong evidence for the effectiveness of the placebo effect. Talbot also considers, however, the negative effects of placebo treatments.