

Placebo Effect Real

The August 10, 2001 issue of *Science* reports on a study which suggests that the placebo effect is real. This, of course, may not seem to be news but for once researchers are saying that the placebo effect plays a larger part in healing than has been realized.

The study was performed at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and dealt with patients with Parkinson's disease. With Parkinson's, patient's brains don't produce enough of a chemical called dopamine.

When patients in the study didn't know if they were taking the Parkinson's drug apomorphine or a placebo, they experienced an increase in dopamine levels similar to those in patients who were taking the apomorphine.

"Some people have suggested that the placebo effect is not that important," says lead researcher Dr. A. Jon Stoessl. "There is a placebo effect and it could be a pretty big effect." In fact, he says, "this is not a small effect. This is a big effect."

We would agree. Many researchers question the ethics of using placebos to treat patients. But, considering the fact that upwards of 90,000 people die every year from proper use of prescription drugs, we question the ethics of not using them. After all, how many people have you heard about who died after using a placebo?

■ Placebos Act On Same Part Of Brain As Pain Drugs

The February 7, 2002 issue of the journal *Scienceexpress* reports that placebo medications (fake drugs) cause the pain-controlling areas of the brain to react the same way they do when affected by regular painkillers.

The study was done at the Cognitive Neurophysiology Research Group in Stockholm, Sweden.

The researchers divided a group of participants into three groups; one group received narcotic painkillers, one group received a placebo and the last group received nothing at all. All three groups were then subjected to painfully hot and non-painful warm sensations. Their reactions were measured by an imaging test that maps brain activity.

Both the painkiller and placebo groups experienced pain relief. Both groups also showed an increase in activity in the part of the brain that controls pain.

Lead researcher Dr. Martin Ingvar says that since the painkillers and the placebo both activate the pain control centers in the brain, “this sort of placebo effect is not something fishy.”

Commentary: We would agree. Many in the medical community, however, feel that using placebos is unethical since the patient is not fully informed about what they are taking. But, since upwards of 100,000 people die every year from drug reactions to properly prescribed and utilized drugs, we feel that their ethical concerns would be better directed towards patient safety. After all, no one ever died from taking a placebo.

■ Painkillers For Knee Pain No Better Than Placebo

The August 2004 issue of the *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases* reports that common painkillers containing acetaminophen are no more effective at relieving symptoms of osteoarthritis of the knee than a sugar pill.

779 patients with knee pain of at least 30 on a 100 point scale during physical activity were observed in the study. The participants were randomly assigned to be given 4 grams per day of acetaminophen (Tylenol) for six weeks or an inactive placebo. The level of improvement the observers were aiming for was a 30% decrease in pain.

52.6% of the acetaminophen group reached this level of relief. 51.9% of the placebo group reached the same level taking the inactive placebo, with an insignificant difference of only .7%.