

Tekst 5

Faith is the greatest analgesic

Placebo: The Belief Effect

by Dylan Evans

Reviewed by Phil Whitaker

1 Dylan Evans begins his account of the placebo effect with the observations of a US anaesthetist named Beecher during the later stages of the second world war. With morphine supplies exhausted and battle casualties still being brought in, Beecher found, to his astonishment, that injections of salt water were effective at relieving a severe pain. His findings 9 people's perception of placebos and, more fundamentally, the prevailing understanding of the workings of the human body.

2 Placebos have a long tradition in medicine: pills made of sugar; tonics containing nothing more medicinal than a dash of alcohol. Treatments in short that should not work. Doctors prescribed them when they wanted to appear to be doing something. The intention was sometimes honourable, but often the motive was more to do with invigorating the practitioner's income than pepping up the patient. Until Beecher, though, no one seriously thought that placebos might actually affect physical disease.

3 From a current-day perspective Beecher's results are readily explained. Pain is now understood as a subjective phenomenon. Peripheral nerves conduct information about bodily injury, but translation by the brain into the perception of pain depends on many other factors. The wounded

servicemen's belief that they had been given morphine, coupled with their expectation that it would alleviate pain, proved sufficient to do just that.

4 Evans discusses studies that show placebo treatments to be capable of diminishing objective manifestations of inflammation such as swelling and muscle spasm, as well as regulating measurable immunological activity. Other studies have defined characteristics of placebos. For there to be a response patients must believe the therapy will be effective; and the placebo must be administered by another person, preferably someone perceived as a healer. Elucidation of the biological pathways that mediate the placebo response offers tantalising glimpses of intricate chemical conversations going on between the brain and the rest of the body.

5 The picture that emerges raises many questions, not least why we should be equipped to respond to the ministrations of others in this way. Has this capacity evolved as a result of our propensity to care for others in our social group? In probing these wider issues Evans is discomfited by the lack of hard evidence, and the putative answers he advances are awkwardly argued and somewhat limited in scope. Evans is a disciple of the scientific world view. The idea of the placebo response as a stimulus for successful social organisation is not considered, and readers with a theological perspective will divine alternative meanings in the evidence he presents.

6 The most striking aspect of this fascinating if blinkered book is the fact that the placebo response can be

evoked by any treatment, whether biologically explicable or not. The effectiveness of some surgical operations and many pharmaceutical preparations will be enhanced if the recipient believes in them and in the

healing abilities of their doctor. As Evans gracefully acknowledges, it is orthodox practitioners who have most to learn from the intriguing findings he presents.

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- 1p 9 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 1?
A challenged
B confirmed
C ignored
- 1p 10 Which of the following does paragraph 2 focus on?
1 The negative effects that placebos had in the past.
2 The reasons why placebos were administered in the past.
A Only 1.
B Only 2.
C Both 1 and 2.
D Neither 1 nor 2.
- 1p 11 What becomes clear about pain from paragraph 3?
A Pain can only be relieved when the patient trusts the medicine.
B The intensity of the experience of pain is regulated by the brain.
C The more serious the injury, the stronger the pain signals from the brain.
- 1p 12 Which of the following is true of the last sentence of paragraph 4 (“Elucidation ... body.”)?
A It criticises the way in which Evans discusses the placebo response.
B It elaborates on the way placebos can sometimes unbalance the body’s internal system.
C It states that a study of the placebo effect throws light on the complex interaction between the mental and the physical.
D It suggests the impossibility of proving the placebo response.
- 1p 13 Which of the following statements agrees with the content of paragraph 5? In trying to explain the placebo effect
A Evans does not convincingly address the possible role of societal factors.
B Evans makes too much of the scientific evidence of the effect.
C Evans underestimates the influence of religion on science.
- 1p 14 Welke combinatie van twee van de onderstaande kwalificaties vormt een beschrijving van de laatste alinea?
1 De alinea bevat een kritische noot.
2 De alinea doet een verbetersuggestie voor het boek.
3 De alinea is neutraal van toon.
4 De alinea is overwegend negatief van toon.
5 De alinea is overwegend positief van toon.
Noteer de nummers van de twee juiste kwalificaties.