



## THE PLACEBO EFFECT - A NEGLECTED HEALING RESOURCE

By Samantha Flower

In recent years public interest in holistic healing has greatly increased, including renewed fascination with the much-disputed “placebo effect”. Critics of complementary and alternative therapies, such as homeopathy, have even suggested that their apparent success was solely due to this phenomenon. At the same time, the success of non-invasive mind-based methods of healing has also attracted much attention in the media, and not only in connection with alternative therapies: conventional medicine is no stranger to the body’s ability to heal itself without any medical intervention. Clearly, with much research being dedicated to the subject, it is topical to ask the question, “What exactly is a placebo?”

‘Placebo’ is a Latin word, meaning ‘I shall please’. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the placebo as ‘A harmless substance given as if it were medicine, to humour a patient or as a dummy pill ... in a controlled experiment’. The result of this action is the ‘placebo effect’. This concept came into being after the introduction into medicine of controlled clinical trials, designed to test the effectiveness of new drugs. Such a trial usually consists of a group of individuals who agree to take a certain drug over a period of time. The group is then divided into two sub-groups, one of which is given the drug, the other a ‘dummy pill’, i.e. the placebo. Neither the patients nor the administering physician know which group is taking the drug as opposed to the placebo, until the trial is complete, to ensure that the effectiveness or otherwise of the new drug is determined without bias. Hence this kind of test is known as a double-blind trial.

### Surprising results

In the early days of using such tests, researchers noticed that often those receiving the placebo experienced noticeable beneficial effects; in some cases these surpassed the results experienced by those taking the actual drug. These baffling findings prompted a surge in scientific research into the phenomenon. Today most experts agree that expectancy plays a large part in the placebo effect. An example of this was recorded some 160 years ago in the famous medical journal *The Lancet*. The report concerned the case of a man who had taken 25 drops of the drug laudanum, believing it to be a bowel cleanser. In fact laudanum contains opium, which is known to cause constipation. However, in this case the subject spent the night making trips to the toilet, experiencing continual uncontrollable bowel motions.

The role of expectation was further corroborated by a series of experiments carried out by the American psychologist Stewart Wolf, who used a placebo and two drugs in his tests. One drug acted as a stomach soother, while the other induced vomiting. When a patient was told that he was being given the stomach-soothing drug, he experienced

no ill effects, although in fact what he received was the vomit-inducing drug. Wolf's experiments also showed that in some cases placebo use yielded the same effect as the actual drug alternative. Moreover, research into psychosomatic conditions, such as pain control, asthma and sleeping problems also confirmed the link between placebo effect and expectancy.

### **How Does It Work?**

None of this explains why placebos have an effect. However, a theory formulated by the American physician Dr Herbert Benson, takes us a step further. Dr Benson believes that the brain stores certain pathways of healing in its memory files; he refers to the body's 'inner pharmacy', a concept originated by the leading researcher Howard Brody. He believes that when a message associated with healing is sent to these memory files, it stimulates the release of natural healing chemicals via the body's 'inner pharmacy'. When an individual is given something, such as a placebo, and told that this will improve his/her health, this response kicks in.

Another, better known theory, that of Pavlov's dogs, concerns the conditioned response mechanism. The Russian researcher Ivan Pavlov rang a bell every time he fed his dogs. After a while the dogs, associating the bell with their meals, began to salivate upon hearing the bell, regardless of whether there was any food present.

According to the records of double-blind trials, health improvements caused by placebo use range from 25 to 75% of patients, suggesting that however intangible the placebo effect may appear, it is real. Conventional medicine still remains sceptical as to its validity, even though its results are beyond dispute and are confirmed again and again by recent experiments. In one of these involving asthmatic children, a strong vanilla aroma was released into the air whenever the young patients used an anti-allergy inhaler. After two weeks the inhalers were removed and the children were exposed to the vanilla aroma alone. Tests showed that they experienced improved lung expansion, even without inhalers. Even surgery has proven to respond to the placebo effect. An American surgeon once ran an experiment, making only an incision in his patient during a make-believe operation. He later discovered that this bogus operation had yielded the same result as the full procedure he had carried out on other patients.

### **A Cheap, Non-Toxic Tool**

All records showing the link between placebo use and improved health point towards one aspect that has been largely neglected by conventional medicine: the incredible healing power of the mind. The mind-body connection is fully recognised and used by

practitioners of alternative and complementary therapies. Orthodox medicine rarely focuses on this, although the findings of psychoneuroimmunology are slowly beginning to change the general attitude. Controlled tests have produced enough evidence to show that using the mind in healing has far-reaching benefits, besides being inexpensive and free from toxic side effects. This in itself should be enough to encourage further research and use of such treatment methods. Howard Brody of Michigan State University believes that patients could learn how to control their own placebo effect, thus heralding a totally new approach to healing. It is his conviction that science should harness the powers of this phenomenon, which he links to the body's 'inner pharmacy', for the good of humanity.

So how does all this concern Gersonites, since the Gerson Therapy is in no way placebo-driven, but solidly based on hyper-nutrition and detoxification? The simple answer is that in true healing we cannot dissociate the mind from the body. In fact, the proven physiological benefits of a healthy diet can be further enhanced by the individual's firm belief in its healing power – an example of 'expectancy' at work. It also points to an individual's level of faith. Statistics show that a person who has faith in his or her chosen path of healing is more likely to achieve better results than those who have none. The moral of the story? Placebo or no placebo, it seems that ultimately the power of the mind, belief and faith have a vast contribution to make to successful treatment. If orthodox medicine were to harness and use the methods exposed by its own findings, the success rate of treatments would rise significantly. Almost certainly pharmaceutical profits would plummet accordingly. Can this be why the holistic approach makes such very slow progress in conventional medicine? I wonder...