

Spring 2018

First Year Seminar

## Homework Assignment 2

### The Placebo Effect

**Reading Assignment: due Thursday, February 1**

“The Placebo Effect,” by Walter A. Brown, *Scientific American*, January 1998, pp. 90-95.

“The Mysterious Placebo,” by John Dodes, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Jan./Feb. 1997, pp. 44-45.

“The Spin Doctors,” by Nicholas Wade, *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 1, 1996, p. 16.

**Reading Assignment: due Tuesday, February 6:** To be announced

**Writing Assignment:**

**First draft: Due midnight Tuesday, Feb. 6**

**Final draft: Due midnight Thursday, Feb. 8**

You must write an essay 500 or more words long, discussing the question of whether placebos should be prescribed by doctors. This essay should include a description of what a placebo is. It should discuss the arguments pro and con about why placebos should or should not be prescribed.

Your paper should finish with a discussion of when you think placebos should be prescribed. You may argue that doctors should never use them, should always use them, or should use them only under certain conditions. If you choose the middle of the road approach, **you should describe under what conditions a placebo should be used.**

A related issue, if you wish to discuss it, is how insurance should handle placebo prescriptions. Should insurance companies be required to pay for treatments that have no intrinsic value, or need they only pay for treatments that cause “objective” improvement?

You may wish to consider the scenarios described below to help you guide your thoughts, but your paper should not focus on these exclusively.

**Discussion:** (in class Thursday, February 8)

Next Thursday, we will discuss the following scenarios. You should argue whether or not placebos should be prescribed in each case. You are a doctor, and have to make medical decisions about the following three patients.

Scenario A: Mr. A complains of terrible back pain. You can find nothing specifically wrong with his back. You prescribe painkillers, which will certainly ease the pain. You also have some plain sugar pills that don't do anything. Should you prescribe these as well, telling Mr. A that "these should help your muscles relax into a more comfortable position"? You can also prescribe back surgery, if you want to.

Scenario B: Ms. B has a brain tumor. After eight months of painful chemotherapy, it is obvious that the chemotherapy isn't working; the tumor is growing swiftly. You can't think of any more treatment for her; her case seems hopeless. You have decided that more chemotherapy is cruel and a waste of time and money. Ms. B read recently in *New Age Magazine* that garlic pills (at \$100 for a week's supply), can cure just about anything. You think it is nonsense. Do you recommend she buy them? What do you tell her about the likelihood that they will work? Can you get insurance companies to pay for them?

Scenario C: Mrs. C has life-threatening allergies, which can be triggered by a variety of factors: mold, dust, etc. Of course, you give her medication to help her with her allergies. "I am also," she tells you with a straight face, "allergic to the number 7." Presumably her "allergy" to the number 7 is purely psychological, but her breathing difficulties are real. "I've been having a lot of trouble at work," she continues, "ever since my office was moved to the seventh floor. Do you think I should quit my job?" What do you recommend to her? Would you request her employer make room for her on another floor?