

uninjured, unblemished man, 24 years old and killed no more than one day before, preferably by hanging, breaking on the wheel or impaling. . . . Leave it one day and one night in the light of the sun and the moon, then cut into shreds or rough strips. Sprinkle on a little powder of myrrh and aloes, to prevent it from being too bitter.”

We may think we’re different now. But we’re not. Placebos still work their magic on us. For years, surgeons cut remnants of scar tissue out of the abdomen, for instance, imagining that this procedure addressed chronic abdominal pain—until researchers faked the procedure in controlled studies and patients reported equal relief.¹⁰ Encainide, flecainide, and mexiletine were widely prescribed off-label drugs for irregular heartbeat—and were later found to cause cardiac arrest.¹¹ When researchers tested the effect of the six leading antidepressants, they noted that 75 percent of the effect was duplicated in placebo controls.¹² The same was true of brain surgery for Parkinson’s disease.¹³ When physicians drilled holes in the skulls of several patients without performing the full procedure, to test its efficacy, the patients who received the sham surgery had the same outcome as those who received the full procedure. And of course the list goes on and on.

One could defend these modern procedures and compounds by noting that they were developed with the best intentions. This is true. But so were the applications of Egyptian mummy, to a great extent. And sometimes, the mummy powder worked just as well as (or at least no worse than) whatever else was used.

The truth is that placebos run on the power of suggestion. They are effective because people believe in them. You see your doctor and you feel better. You pop a pill and you feel