

is nothing “just” about the power of a placebo, and in reality it represents the amazing way our mind controls our body. How the mind achieves these amazing outcomes is not always very clear.\* Some of the effect, to be sure, has to do with reducing the level of stress, changing hormonal secretions, changing the immune system, etc. The more we understand the connection between brain and body, the more things that once seemed clear-cut become ambiguous. Nowhere is this as apparent as with the placebo.

In reality, physicians provide placebos all the time. For instance, a study done in 2003 found that more than one-third of patients who received antibiotics for a sore throat were later found to have viral infections, for which an antibiotic does absolutely no good (and possibly contributes to the rising number of drug-resistant bacterial infections that threaten us all<sup>14</sup>). But do you think doctors will stop handing us antibiotics when we have viral colds? Even when doctors know that a cold is viral rather than bacterial (and many colds are viral), they still know very well that the patient wants some sort of relief; most commonly, the patient expects to walk out with a prescription. Is it right for the physician to fill this psychic need?

The fact that physicians give placebos all the time does not mean that they want to do this, and I suspect that the practice tends to make them somewhat uncomfortable. They’ve been trained to see themselves as men and women of science, people who must look to the highest technologies of modern medicine for answers. They want to think of themselves as real healers, not practitioners of voodoo. So it can

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\*We do understand quite precisely how a placebo works in the domain of pain, and this is why we selected the painkiller as our object of investigation. But other placebo effects are not as well understood.