

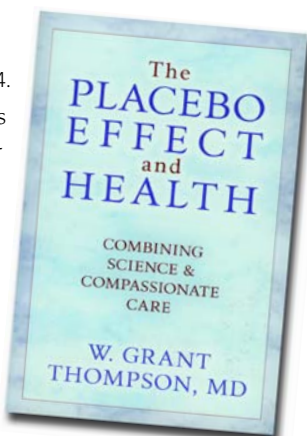
Understanding the placebo effect

The placebo effect and health. Combining science and compassionate care. W Grant Thompson. New York: Prometheus Books, 2005 (350 pp, \$23.35). ISBN 1 59102 275 4.

THE PLACEBO EFFECT, surrounded by myths resistant to time and research, fascinates researchers and clinicians alike. It has been said that the placebo effect is the only action which all medical treatment has in common, and, in some instances, it is the only useful action. Therefore, we all should have a keen interest in it.

Understanding the placebo effect is difficult. There are, it seems, more definitions on offer than research groups investigating it — and all are unsatisfactory in one way or another. Difficulties increase when trying to answer some of the many questions that placebos pose. Do we need placebos to generate a placebo effect? What elements constitute a placebo response? Are placebo effects always beneficial? Are some situations more placebo-prone than others? What ethical implication does the use of a placebo have in research or clinical practice?

Grant Thompson, a clinician, researcher and science writer, addresses these and other questions with analytical clarity. Well



read and up-to-date on recent developments, he makes complex things understandable without oversimplifying them. His book is extensively referenced and helped by a detailed index — a text that can be used for reference as well as for reading. The “story” that Thompson develops before his readers’ eyes is coherent and exciting.

There are of course many books on placebo, but this one is among the better ones in its class. It is not aimed at the specialist researcher nor at the uninformed layperson. For the many people who find themselves between these two extremes *The placebo effect and health* will be useful. Its strength lies in that it is easy to read, even when the subject matter is complex.

As the placebo effect is responsible for so much of the success of medical interventions, it seems a good idea to know what it is about.

Edzard Ernst

Director, Complementary Medicine
Peninsula Medical School, Exeter, UK

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