

Report:  
Placebo effect not found in many studies  
By Linda A. Johnson  
The Associated Press

One of the most strongly held beliefs in medicine - that dummy pills or other sham treatments greatly help many patients - has been called into question by Danish researchers who found little or no "placebo effect" in dozens of studies.

That led the researchers and other doctors to recommend that for ethical reasons, placebos, or inactive substances, no longer be given to patients outside of controlled medical experiments.

"The shoe is on the other foot now. The people who claim there are placebo effects are going to have to show it," said Dr. John C. Bailar III, a just-retired professor of health studies at the University of Chicago who wrote an editorial accompanying the research in today's New England Journal of Medicine.

Arthur Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, said: "I was shocked by this study. This just goes completely against the grain."

In many medical studies, patients in one group receive an experimental new treatment, while a comparison group gets a lookalike dummy pill or other placebo. Neither the patients nor the doctors know who is getting what. The goal is to see if medicines being tested do more good than people's will to get better.

Studies occasionally include a third group not getting a placebo. Those patients receive nothing, or just get the standard treatment for a condition if the study is testing whether combining a new treatment with the current one is better.

The Danish researchers combined the findings of 114 such studies from around the world, involving dozens of conditions ranging from colds and seasickness to Alzheimer's disease and schizophrenia, to see how the sham treatment stacked up to no treatment.

In most of the studies, the placebo group fared about the same as the group getting no treatment. The exceptions were studies of pain treatments and some others with subjective results, meaning patients reported how much symptoms bothered them, rather than having an objective measure such as blood pressure.

Placebo recipients in the pain studies averaged a 15 percent reduction in pain, and patients in the other subjective studies had even smaller improvements.

Many past studies and textbooks suggest about one-third of patients given placebos in medical experiments get better, presumably because they are getting an effective treatment.

The researchers and other experts said the improvements in subjective measures might be explained by "reporting bias," where patients, incorrectly judge their condition or overstate any improvement to please their doctor.