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Editorial

Placebos, Nocebos, and the Contact Zones of Biomedicine

The term “placebo” (from the Latin *it will please*) refers to ways of healing that defy the causative logics of medicine. Placebos prompt a cessation of symptoms, they hail the pleasure of health into being, but they lack the very properties by which drugs or other interventions elicit changes in bodies. Nocebos are an ominous side of the same coin: so-called “inert” substances and procedures that bring about harms and side effects, seemingly unbidden. Both placebos and nocebos vex the causal, mechanistic narrative of biomedicine, while functioning as a foil to pharmaceutical drugs and standardized procedures that draw bodies into curative relations within this same narrative.

Stepping away from the laboratory procedures, experimental paradigms, and neuroimaging protocols of conventional placebo and nocebo studies, this special issue engages with placebos and nocebos through a variety of literary and artistic media, enabling us to look beyond the standard biomedical narrative. Through poetry, comics, photogra-

phy, and creative non-fiction, we experience the visceral and sensorial dimensions of the biosocial that often pass unnoticed, and we are invited to recognize the (literal) embodiment of sociocultural, political, and economic contexts in the meaning-making activities of placebos and nocebos. Such encounters implicate us within the intersubjective relations of medicine; within the cultural situatedness of healing practices; within the very technologies that bring new drugs, triumphant, to market (Stengers, 2003). Above all, we find placebos and nocebos at play within practices that determine what counts as “real” (and what, conversely, counts as imaginary, deceptive, or wishful thinking) within the frame of biomedical knowledge.

As you explore this special issue of *Ars Medica*, consider the ways in which each piece interrogates and opens up contact zones within medicine in ways that prompt critical reflection. Contact zones (Pratt, 1991) are social spaces where clashes of culture are embedded within asymmetrical relations of power. The “literate arts” of the contact zone include critique, collaboration, parody, imaginary dialogue, denunciation, transculturation ... on the list goes (ibid). We see these within the contributions to the special issue: each artist uses their art form to explore and play with the binaries that placebos and nocebos have conventionally been solicited to establish—objective versus subjective, real versus imaginary, cure versus harm. And, as with any form of artistic endeavor, there is heterogeneity across the meanings that are presented here.

Each feature piece explores salient aspects of biomedical contact zones. Claudette Abrams’ vi-

sual essays, for example, demonstrate how belonging to specific places affect health and well-being positively and how disconnection from place may have the opposite effect; at the same time, these pieces remind us of the porous line between healing and harming, a crucial contact zone that is in need of greater consideration in medical practices. Extending medical anthropological work on “therapeutic economies” (2011) through innovations in poetic form, Duana Fullwiley’s four-part series of poems explores the relational dynamics of human and non-human actors within the contact zones opened up by botanists, traditional healers, pharmaceuticals, hematologists, geneticists, and individuals seeking relief. In a series of incisive comic sketches, Timothy Stock, together with a team of undergraduate student artists, renders contact zones as parodic zones of association. As their artist statement attests, this work emerges through the collaborative process itself, amusing the viewer while conjuring up resonances of “placebo” and “nocebo” beyond the realm of biomedicine. Lisa Erdman shares this interest in the absurdist dimensions of placebo, highlighting three competing referents of “placebo” within biomedicine: its formal definition, “to please,” its colloquial meaning, “to deceive,” and its instrumental meaning that is especially relevant in the context of clinical research trials, “to purify.” This digital performance blurs the boundaries between these meanings, unsettling the seemingly tidy distinctions upon which conventional biomedical understandings of placebo rely.

Each piece within the body of this special issue draws out aspects of placebos and nocebos that are pertinent in particular to feminist thought, disability studies, and post-colonial and queer theory. While these domains of scholarship are often deeply intertwined with the arts and humanities, they are brought less frequently into conversation with conventional medical spaces (save, of course, for their role in the critique of specific medical practices). The contact zones that open up through the resonances in each piece—be it through poetry, prose, or essay—are ones that foster exchanges between these areas of critical and scholarly thought and biomedical frameworks.

“Hocus Pocus, Hexes and Healers” provides another perspective on placebo and nocebo, this time from the dual standpoints of magician and placebo studies researcher. Jason Da Silva Castanheira and Amir Raz play with the imbrications between rituals in medicine and what has traditionally been rejected from medicine as voodoo, magic, or sham, drawing our attention to the commonalities that are so often erased by the veneer of scientific practices. “Tamoxifen & Tumeric” offers a glimpse of the tensions between holistic practices and the harsh realities of chemotherapy, calling into question the boundary between toxicity and the possibility of cure. Sree Cherian draws us toward the faith (and faithlessness) that suffuses these seemingly disparate branches of healing. Read against “Hocus Pocus, Hexes and Healers,” we have two different representations of the “cut” that we make between harm and cure (Wilson, 2016).

Gina Nicoll's "Travels to the Psych Ward" offers us an experiential narrative that, like Abrams' visual essays, links the complexities of place and time to comfort as well as to grief. Complicating the line between "healing" and "harming," the author engages with a non-linear trajectory of movement—one oriented toward safety, but a kind of safety that does not take its own emergence for granted. Tanmoy Das Lala's "Sugar Bones" and "Burden of Proof" forge explicit connections with placebo studies—specifically with research into placebo analgesia and surgical procedures. Each piece opens up a novel encounter with the vexing distinction between what is "real" and what is "imagined," a distinction rendered recognizable through the physiological changes that are produced by placebo and are measurable by researchers. We also encounter, in the alliteration of sham and shame, the subjectivity of the very researcher who is attending to such changes. Poetry and prose proffer especial access to a lived experience perspective, be it that of researcher or health care service user. This perspective is typically removed and distanced from placebo and nocebo research in spite of the acknowledged importance of relationality and context in these same studies.

Dan Champion's pieces draw out yet another set of contact zones in which the line between placebo/nocebo emerges as both salient and in need of scrutiny. In "Unhealing" and "Medicinalable," we hear subtle references to the varied meanings and usages of placebo—relief, sham, con, cure—all meant to mark the boundary

between what is real and not-real. Along similar lines, “Antioxidants” and “Spices” wrestle with the binary of real/not-real through an embrace of chemistry and physiology as well as ritual. *Campion* also makes reference to the role that placebos play in purifying cures so that they might be brought to the market as legitimate, efficacious treatments. “When Doctoring” resonates with many of the earlier pieces surrounding the rites and rituals of medicine. This piece, by CE McMurren, foregrounds the subjectivity of the physician and prescriber, who, gazing inward, offers a questioning stance toward the performance of medicine: to what degree is it prophetic and to what degree steeped in evidence, and how do these alternatives hang together? In turn, Ashna Asim elaborates the entwined relations between affect, intellect, and experience that are at the heart of biomedicine itself. “Anastomosis” and “Carcinoma in situ” invite us to reflect on the import of placebos and nocebos for the vast array of actors who are affected by their activities, from laboratory scientist to medical student, from physician to patient, and from writer to reader.

As placebos and nocebos attract increasing scholarly attention from biomedical researchers, bioethicists, anthropologists and philosophers, they continue to bely standard research methods that seek to quantify their effects or make sense of their capacity to induce or alleviate symptoms. Daniel Moerman (2013) points out, for example, that the placebo effect indicates “the effect of something that has no effect” (p. 125), a seeming

paradox. This special issue shifts the framing of placebos and nocebos by exploring their activities as essentially related to contact zones. Neither discrete phenomena that can be understood on their own nor generalizable patterns that can be rendered apart from biosocial context, placebos and nocebos emerge throughout this issue as relational, emergent, and significant.

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Suze Berkhout, University of Toronto
Ada S. Jaarsma, Mount Royal University