

# Drugs, surgery and the placebo effect

Ever wondered why some people swear by the treatment that they have had (whether it be drugs, surgery or complementary and alternative care like chiropractic), while others think that it's made no difference? The placebo effect plays a role.

A drug should be proven to be better than the "placebo effect" for it to be considered effective. In drug trials, patients get split into two groups. Some patients get the real drug, while others get the placebo – an inert "sugar pill". The results of the two groups are compared. It's typical for the placebo treatment to help around 30% of the people taking it, while the active drug might help around 40% of the people taking it (if it's a good one). Here, the advantage the drug has versus the sugar pill seems fairly large.

But let's look at it differently: for every 10 people on the sugar pill, 3 got better. For every 10 people on the drug, 4 got better. The real



**Dr Tat Loo: Chiropractor**

power of the drug: out of every 10 people who used it, only one extra person got better. Not so impressive. Especially if it cost half-a-billion dollars or more to bring a drug to market in the first place, and it comes with inherent risks of chemical toxicity. Even if a drug was extremely effective and helped 50% of the people who took it, it would still mean that only

one extra person in five would be helped compared to the sugar pill. Few drugs tested are this good.

Believe it or not, surgery is also affected by the placebo effect. Consider arthroscopic knee surgery for osteoarthritis. Studies have suggested that it's no better than other treatments despite its expense and wide use. Some researchers assert that the main short-term benefits of this surgery comes from – you guessed it – the placebo effect and that the long-term benefits of the surgery are not proven. Not flash, once you consider that up to 5% of the patients undergoing the procedure will suffer from infections and other complications.

More on placebo coming soon: does chiropractic care make good use of the placebo effect to help people? And if a sugar pill gets someone better, is it just in their head?

This content reflects personal opinions of Dr Tat Loo, a Dunedin-based chiropractor.

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