

Placebo and Number Needed to Treat



To the Editor:

Tavel¹ rightly warned us against ignoring that the placebo effect participates in the improvement when we intervene by pill or procedure.¹ However, stating that there is a “moral dilemma” when he questioned whether it is proper to inform a patient that s/he may have benefitted from a placebo effect underlines how we can fail to properly inform patients, deserve comments.

Indeed, when we intervene, we usually oversell the benefit and bypass the harm. Informed consent means giving the patient the true figures for treatment vs no treatment. Number needed to treat to avoid mortality or a specific morbidity can be easily understood by most of our patients. We must practice “humility,” as Tavel concluded, but there is no “moral dilemma.”

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Last, Tavel stated the effect of placebo is “profound in relieving subjective symptoms.”¹ Although the effect is statistically significant, it remains small and poorly relevant to clinical practice (see Table 6 of Haake et al²).

Providing explanations and reassurance to promote autonomy is the best way to help our patients. It is more demanding and time consuming than pilling, but it preserves confidence in the long term. Prescribing a placebo is disease mongering.³ Placebos strengthen medical arrogance and infantilize people.

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References

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