

WELL-KNOWN AND NOT WELL-KNOWN FACES OF PLACEBO¹

A well-known face... is that of this entirely neutral substance which could, in the patient who does not know the real nature of it, set "inner strength for recovery" in motion. It mobilises researchers, doctors and statisticians who try to understand its hidden mysteries and what pervades experimentation.

That "piled up series of uncontrolled strange mechanisms" poses a problem and clashes with the field of psychiatry... The DSM classification and visible effects of the substances which have been tried out and put to the test of clinical experiment will show the most disturbing of aspects.

A well-known face... at the heart of the matter: the relationship.

The relationship with the world... the relationship with the treating person... the "placebo effect" always implies a relationship.

The "magic" stemming from the past still impregnates the present and pervades both the imperceptible nature of the bond with the "treating person" and what wants to escape it... The pharmacological action of a medicine does not suffice to describe what happens in clinical practice.

The relationship with the other, who observes, acts and -or- treats, mobilises unknown forces. The emotional aspect will always be present... The repressed fear of the "irrational", confused with the unexplained, seems pregnant and excessive!

To be determined to draw conclusions from groups of patients who will never be absolutely alike disturbs "double-blinding" and poses the problem of the clinical experimentation of homoeopathic remedies. There is a dimension that pervades every act of the "treating person" and what happens in the apparent neutrality of experimentation.

The doctor stands alone. Even if they reject the irrational, they will always put into practice their convictions and beliefs. They will play a part as regards the "placebo effect".

This pharmacologically neutral substance, which "cures" whereas it is supposed to contain only something symbolic or imaginary, would thus set in motion the most amazing of effects. The question will be what the therapeutic effects of "placebos" are really attributable to.

A not well-known face... the past plays a part...

Placebos were, by their very denomination, marked by their origins and the atmosphere impregnated with death and religion which surrounded their birth. If, for the Pasteurian type of medicine of the nineteenth century, everything was contained and could be understood

¹ From **Ziegel**, Geneviève: *L'homéopathie face au placebo*. Edition des entretiens internationaux de Monaco. Downloadable version on Numilog.

through "matter", placebos relaunched the debate. They threw back into question a univocal view which consisted in attributing its curative part only to the materiality of the substance: The bond with the therapist and ritual which goes with every "therapeutic" - either medical, ethnocultural or psychoanalytic - consultation will have to be studied. The irrational, which cannot be ignored, is at work in different ways.

The "placebo effect": is it the biochemical result of a suggestion on a symbolic plane? The question might be considered.

The unsolved problem of the aetiology of the disorders observed subtly infiltrates many elements of therapeutics and the "placebo effect" which is linked with it. That contributes to complicating its nature, which it is difficult to define and seems irrational.

What comes from culture and infiltrates the "placebo effect" poses another problem: does culture generate mental disorders, or does it only organise their form? Ethnopsychiatry studies the therapeutic impact of current classifications marked by the culture in which they came into being.

Whatever the approach adopted, the "placebo effect" will thus be always present... It will constantly play a part in "double-blinding", which challenges the realism of the notion of objectivity that is linked with it.

A little-known face... a different face...

To consider that poses a problem... and makes it necessary to look at things from a different point of view, with specific or non-specific levels of action.

From the biological angle:

- The allopathic method has an effect that is specifically linked with the action of the medicine, which is more or less constant and reproducible. It treats the illness by acting on the symptoms or modifications of metabolic regulation. The products used for some "traditional" or "ethnic" therapies, which have little-codified and often not well-known effects, fall into that category.

- The homoeopathic method, too, has an effect that is specifically linked with the action of the medicine, but it has a distinctive feature: the medicine focuses on the subject in a different way.

Its effect on the organism can, in the same way as the aforementioned, be spotted on some points through classic processes, biology, etc. Its remarkable action comes from the way the organism treats the information which is given to it at different levels and according to certain precise modalities. It treats the subject battling against their illness.

The pathogénésie² of the medicine, by offering the organism a form of virtual image of the disorder that affects it, gives it, through its diluted and succussed form, the means of taking in its "informing" effects in a personal way and according to its state.

As for the neutral substance that a placebo represents, its effect is not linked with the nature of the product used or its introduction into the organism but also with its symbolic and imaginary impact and the way the subject puts their subjectivity into it.

From the imaginary and symbolic angle:

The different perspective which is now introduced complements what comes into play in the "placebo effect" inherent in every treating process. Every medicine will always be accompanied by an extra effect, strengthened and clarified by words.

The homoeopathic medicine clearly poses a problem: even though it belongs to the medicines integrated into the official pharmacopoeia, its approach, also including imagination and symbols, is confined to an "unclassifiable" place, which contributes to perpetuating the notion of "placebo" that is linked with its mode of action³. The consultation explores the subject's mode of being in different lines of their history and in a particular way.

By standing on the side of the subject, homoeopathy, psychoanalysis and therapies are entitled to have a say in the clarification of the "placebo effect" inherent in every treating process... Two types of "treatments" seem to emerge: the first uses a methodology whose use adapts greatly to the subject who mobilises its effects in a personal way and according to the singularity of their history⁴. That is the case of homoeopathy, some "ethnic or cultural" approaches, psychoanalysis and some types of "psychotherapy". The second has a methodology which is less specific to the subject and with a more general impact: that is the case of therapies with the prescription of medicines, some types of group therapy including invigoration, some cultural therapies and some based on a cultural ritual, including the taking of a medicine. Even though the approach is personalised, the content of the unconscious will not be explored.

A little-known face... the past is still present...

Homoeopathy inherits a heavy burden... that of the "pharmakon-pharmakos" and that of placebos...

Pharmakon: a poison for thought, which it dares to perturb, before being a worrying beverage for the body. The "pharmakon" medicine is both the "remedy" and the illness.

² Pathogénésie: revealing the signs observed in a healthy person subjected to the taking of a substance in accordance with the method advocated by Hahnemann.

³ The approach that it implies does not fall within the scope of psychotherapy, psychoanalysis or what is encompassed in therapies with cultural and ethnic connotations.

⁴ In an analogical and slightly widened way, one might say in the "way of a similimum". In homoeopathy, the similimum is the medicine whose pathogénétic symptoms cover the maximum symptoms of the patient and represent them in their profound nature. It corresponds in the most precise way to what they are on the planes of mental signs and psychological structure. The simile refers to less specific signs and a less personal reactional mode linked with a given situation.

The separating duality which led to distinguish clearly the poison from the remedy, the soul from the body and the soma from the psyche contributes to the conditioning of thought.

"Pharmakos" refers, without distinction, to "the poisoner⁵ (5), magician, blackguard or scoundrel" but also to "the one who acts as a remedy and sheath (...), the one who acts as 'a remedy or protection in atonement for somebody else's - especially a city - misdeeds' ", since they are deemed to be carrying all the evils of the city but also capable of ridding it of them.

Concentrating in the same place "the illness and its remedy", it represents the pharmakon **as it was originally** and in its initial form, before the sacred was separated from the profane and the poison from the medicine. It shows it in a symbolic way through the rite that is linked with it. A vestige of the original pharmakon, the pharmakos refers to the very essence of the remedy. The rite of the Pharmakos is its materialisation and symbolic designation.

The word "Pharmakon", which refers to a "substance by which the nature of a body is altered", is thus somewhat ambiguous because of what the word "alter" implies. Beyond the healing virtue, the altering one is just beneath the surface and it is as if it left traces of a poison... It represents "any beneficial or harmful drug... medicinal drug, medicine, fatal, devouring, murderous or deadly poison, magic preparation... tincture or rouge". It hides and sometimes conceals... It is also a "way of ensuring one's safety". Perhaps it leads one, through the transformations inherent in illness and what it induces itself, to think?

It thus has those two meanings linked with its preparation: one shows the material aspect and the other the symbolic one. In a way, they both are the representations of it; the (original) one – the pharmakos as a remedy, the other, emerging as soon as the sacred was cast out from any therapeutic process, the pharmakon as a medicine.

The rite of the Pharmakos requires expanding and also careful thought.

In point of fact, when the City was "ill" or during the spring festival, there was a purification rite that consisted in making a poor wretch, who was paid sometimes generously for that, or else a disabled person, walk in the main streets of the Core of the city. They were beaten with perennial plants so that they should never reproduce, the citizens could go and touch them to get rid of their "miasms" and, at sunset, they were expelled from the Core of the City, then either cast out or burnt or killed. The purification was thus done, as they had the distinctive feature of being "the evil and its remedy, paying for the others and also atoning for their misdeeds". The following day was a day of celebration since the City started a new cycle, could regenerate and regain its health!

A strange analogy with the homoeopathic medicine...

Everything seems to happen as if, through the rite that it performed, the Pharmakos had to keep its forgotten original meaning intact since the sacred separated from the profane and the poison, from the medicine.

⁵ The one who poisons and thus brings about evil, carries evil and does evil. (Bailly Dictionary)

Through the obvious analogy between the rite of the Pharmakos and the definition which is given of it, the question is thus whether, through the homoeopathic remedy and Hahnemannian discipline, some older knowledge, whose vivid vestiges and living potential remain in the blanks of the message conveyed, is not brought to light again. The question can be considered.

A still little-known face: the "placebo effect" reflects the present.

Does homoeopathy carry that manifold-level connotation of the past?

"Placebo" is the first word of the vespers for the dead. Some ordinary people were paid to sing placebo and express their grief... Dupery, trickery and lies... Placebos are "medicines" prescribed to "please" the patient.

Its negative connotation is still present in collective memory, enhanced by all the subconscious knowledge of everything that is linked with it... It influences all the current thinking and generates closings which, as they are often systematic, might hamper progress within research and scientific thinking itself even though homoeopathy puts its principles in the Laws of living creatures.

But perhaps its merit is already that, as it is always put into the category of placebos, it makes one think about them, their content, actual role and true essence and also what is linked with them and inherent in every therapeutic process.

To think and thwart the traps of thinking habits and paralysing influences...: that is what "placebos" encourage to do... The mystery of what they carry with them makes one think...

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