Using Placebos in Research Involving Terminal Illnesses

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Abstract
Placebos are medical interventions that falsely lead patients to believe that they are receiving treatment and that their condition is being changed, when truly no specific treatment is being administered. Using placebos in research involving terminal illnesses has become debatable. While a placebo could potentially give way to new treatments, through testing alongside a specific drug in a clinical trial, the placebo itself may fail and the patient is not cured leading to possible fatality. It has been found that using placebos in research, like performing surgeries, can aid in medical or clinical research and could help our society financially by discouraging unnecessary operations. On the other hand, there are also risks involved, including the health risks that may result from the placebo-controlled trial, and most importantly the justification and ethics of using placebos on patients without their consent. While evaluating several studies involving placebo-induced treatments, we have discovered methods in which placebos can help society; although these helpful means can also raise issues regarding one’s ethics. Using placebos in treatments will not necessarily treat the illness itself, but they can be beneficial towards research in discovering new treatments for terminal illnesses.

Ethical Question
Is it ethical to use placebos in research involving terminal illnesses? Is it ethical to use placebos on patients who believe that they are really being treated for their illness?

Introduction
The use of placebos in research involving terminal illnesses is debatable. There are possible benefits to performing placebo-controlled trials. However, the ethics of using placebos on patients without their consent is what drives our ethical question.

Discussion
Placebos have helped patients make full recoveries from their terminal illness on their own until the patients are told that the treatment they received is not the drug they were told that they were receiving. In one particular case the treatment failed and the patient had a relapse after reading an article about the ineffective drug, and the patient became more sick than before the treatment had taken place. This particular case involved the trial-stage cancer drug called Krebiozen. Krebiozen was a drug that was supposed to be the end to cancer, but this was not the case. The drug never got approved and instead was less effective than the placebo given in the double blind trial (The Placebo Effect). The reason that the Krebiozen placebo helped the patient get better was because of the mental effect that taking a drug to cure them was working and their mind telling their body that this will help it so it did, though it only worked because the patient believed it would. This shows how the mind can effect the body in more ways then one. The placebo itself can be used to help the human but at the same time it can hurt since placebos fool the mind into thinking that the body is receiving treatment and the patient will feel fine but in truth the body isn’t fine at all. The placebo is just tricking the brain into easing the pain naturally so that the patient won’t feel it and think that they are cured.

Another point is that Placebo-controlled trials can hinder the research and treatment of terminal illnesses. For example, one article claims that the rigorous drug trials administered by the Food and Drug Administration deny patients with cancer from getting access to potentially lifesaving drugs. One of the ways the FDA prohibits cancer patients from receiving potential life-saving vaccines, is through the increasing requirement for companies to hold randomized and placebo-controlled trials with new cancer treatments. The potential health risks and mainly the ethics of using placebos on patients makes placebo research debatable (FDA Rules Hinder Cancer Vaccines).

Analysis
The two topics that have been discussed here illustrate the ethics of Placebo research in terminal illnesses. In The Placebo Effect the patient had a full recovery from being told that the medicine given to them would help them fully recover. This can be ethical in some ways but it mostly isn’t ethical at all because telling the patient that the placebo will help them get better is false because it truly has no actual medical effects. Their condition goes back to the way it was and will eventually lead to death. The other topic demonstrates how having a placebo can hinder the treatment of terminal illness which in turn can hurt the patient even more than it already has and the patient can no longer be helped and will be forced to wait for the inevitable untreated because of specific guidelines that must be followed.

Conclusion
The use of placebos is mainly just a way of psychological treatment. Placebo treatment does not treat the illness itself. Performing placebo-controlled trials on patients is unethical if they are not informed and have not given their consent. Even if the patient is terminally ill, they should have the right to know exactly how they are being treated.

Bibliography
“FDA Rules Hinder Cancer Vaccines” - http://www.aei.org/issue/32

Fig. 1. Arguriou, Peter. The Placebo Effect - The Triumph of Mind over Body.