Should doctors talk about the placebo effect with their patients?

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Clinical and laboratory studies demonstrate that placebo and nocebo effects influence various symptoms and conditions after the administration of both inert and active treatments. There is an increasing need for up-to-date recommendations on how to inform patients about placebo and nocebo effects in clinical practice and train clinicians how to disclose this information.

Based on previous clinical recommendations concerning placebo and nocebo effects, a study was conducted consisting of open- and closed-ended survey questions followed by a final expert meeting. The surveys were subdivided into 3 parts: (1) informing patients about placebo effects, (2) informing patients about nocebo effects, and (3) training clinicians how to communicate this information to the patients.

The results of the surveys showed that there was consensus on communicating general information about placebo and nocebo effects to patients (e.g., explaining their role in treatment) could be beneficial, but that such information needs to be adjusted to match the specific clinical context (e.g., condition and treatment). Experts also agreed that training clinicians to communicate about placebo and nocebo effects should be a regular and integrated part of medical education that makes use of multiple formats, including face-to-face and online modalities.

The current study provides consensus-based recommendations and practical considerations for disclosures about placebo and nocebo effects in clinical practice. Future research is needed on how to optimally tailor information to specific clinical conditions and patients' needs, and on developing standardized disclosure training modules for clinicians.

More information: Andrea W.M. Evers et al. What Should Clinicians Tell Patients about Placebo and Nocebo Effects? Practical Considerations Based on Expert Consensus, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* (2020). DOI: 10.1159/000510738

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