

generously paid tribute in this splendid book.

Eldryd Parry, The Tropical Health and Education Trust, London

Lars Ole Andersen, Mogens H Claësson, Asbjørn Hróbjartsson and Anja Norbæk Sørensen, *Placebo. Historie, biologi og effekt*, Akademisk Forlag, 1997, pp. 178, illus. (87-500-3413-8).

Since 1950 or so, placebos and their effect have generated a considerable interest in certain medical communities, in particular among psychiatrists and the designers of clinical trials, yet the only significant external study of this phenomenon to appear has been Howard Brody's doctoral investigation, *Placebos and the philosophy of medicine*, published in 1980. In 1997, however, three book-length studies were produced: a collection of essays edited by Anne Harrington (*The placebo effect: an interdisciplinary exploration*, Harvard University Press); Arthur and Elaine Shapiro's *The powerful placebo* (Johns Hopkins University Press), and this multi-authored Danish contribution; testimony, perhaps, to the recent revival of interest in mind-body relationships, in the power of the mind to influence healing. The Harrington volume is philosophical in its approach, being intended "to push the envelope of thinking on placebo in ways that might help reshape how the problem is conceived and studied . . . to ponder how to do better justice to the integrated ways in which sociocultural meanings and physiological mechanisms function fluidly within a single human being" (p. 9). It relates largely to current concerns over placebos, whereas the Shapiros elegantly and accessibly take a long-term historical perspective, from Cro-Magnon times (c. 20,000 BC) forward to the end of the twentieth century. The Shapiro emphasis is, essentially, on the centrality of the placebo effect in the success of medical intervention across the centuries; in the relations of the placebo to psychiatry and to clinical trials; in the laws which govern the nonspecific but very

powerful therapeutic potential of the placebo effect. Arthur Shapiro himself, who died in 1995, may be considered the doyen of placebo studies: his contributions far outnumber other entries in his own bibliography, and provide crucial core literature for the independent Danish investigations.

Three publications on this subject in one year might be considered at least one too many, but the Danes' study is by no means superfluous. It at once complements and extends the perspective offered by the other two books. Like the Shapiro volume, it is lucidly and accessibly written for a non-specialist readership; unlike the Shapiro volume, it consciously takes three different approaches to its subject. In the first section, Asbjørn Hróbjartsson explores current issues surrounding the placebo effect. The placebo, he argues, provides a unique focus for examining the relationship between medical science, body, mind, and clinical treatment. In the first place he examines the diverse and often paradoxical uses of the placebo concept in medical literature (for example, that it is at once accepted as scientific good in clinical experiment yet utilized as an expression of doubt, or as an implication of pseudo-science, when used of complementary therapies), then he discusses selected definitions of the terms "placebo" and "placebo effect". The third section deals with the transformation of the placebo effect, from a part of everyday medicine before World War II, to a new central role in the randomized clinical trial after that War. It is an area dealt with more fully and reliably by the Shapiros, but it is good to be reminded, by the account of Johannes Fibiger's pioneering application of Louis' numerical method in his 1898 investigations in Copenhagen into the effectiveness of diphtheria anti-toxin (p. 33), that serious medical research is undertaken in countries other than the big four (Britain, America, France and Germany). Hróbjartsson concludes by discussing how to measure the placebo effect, and its significance in clinical medicine.

The central section of the book, by Lars Ole Andersen, deals with the placebo's historical

and cultural contexts with a sensitivity and imagination that outpaces the Shapiros' much lengthier but more pragmatic treatment of the placebo's history. Andersen, for example, sets the placebo-effect within the context of early modern medical ideas of health and its maintenance; he explores linkages with magic, ritual, and superstition through magic words and magical formulae (the form of words spoken over a sickbed may later be interpreted as witchcraft); he traces the development of the use of the word placebo since the eighteenth century with less scientific precision than the Shapiros, but with intriguing excursions into the anthropological, religious and cultural dimensions of the subject, from healing ceremonies to Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome and the cultural meaning of nightmares for the Hmong people of Laos. Andersen moves on to mind/body relationships, to AIDS and the will to live, to the issues surrounding "good treatment" and the thoughtful healing of patients. It is a stimulating, thought-provoking chapter, richly suggestive of the diverse cultural significances of the placebo effect: for historians this is perhaps the most rewarding contribution yet on the placebo's past and present significances.

In the final section of the book, Claesson and Nørbaek Sørensen deal with the subject of neuropsychimmunology—an area that the Shapiros left resolutely untouched. Thus the Shapiros note (p. 233): "Our critical, data-oriented review of the literature does not substantiate the belief that placebos and psychological factors have a specific psychological effect on physical illness . . . neuropsychimmunology . . . appears to be characterized more by creative speculation about the interaction of psychological, immunological and brain relationships than by critical studies in human beings. The extensive findings reported are more like neuropsychophysiological perturbations that do not have significant, prolonged, or important clinical effects".

In sharp contrast to this dismissive line, Claesson and Nørbaek Sørensen set out to explore this new area of biological research, which seeks to demonstrate the links between

psychological factors and the immune system. Here, plainly, a new scientific discipline is at once emerging and being contested. The Danish authors manage a convincing account of recent research into the immune system and molecular messengers that connect it to the nervous system, and conclude by expressing the firm belief that neuropsychimmunology will help to illuminate the factors which influence health in general and will enable medicine to make use of the placebo effect in treatment strategies. As with Andersen's informed historical perspective, this chapter contributes exciting new perspectives to the history of the placebo and its effects, and enriches our understanding of their power. Generally speaking, and for its superior factual account of the role of the placebo in psychotherapy and in clinical trials, *The powerful placebo* is likely to become the standard text on this subject, but *Placebo* offers an important extension of the Shapiro account, and one that should not be neglected.

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Ernest Smith and Beryl Cottell, *A history of the Royal Dental Hospital of London and School of Dental Surgery, 1858–1985*, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Athlone Press, 1997, pp. xi, 177, £17.95 (0-485-11517-4).

The School of Dental Surgery of the Royal Dental Hospital had the distinction of being the first institution in Britain to provide academic training for dentistry; it also enjoyed the dubious honour of being the first to be closed down. Despite its apparently narrow focus, this highly readable slim volume conveys a good sense of the social, economic, university and medico-political contexts within which academic dentistry has developed since 1858. Its authors were intimately involved in administering the institution during the last decades of its existence. They take a cool and sometimes wry look at some of its myths and demi-gods, informed by a professional