

POSTER PRESENTATION

Open Access

P05.36. How do lay people conceptualise and reason about the use of placebos in healthcare?

F Bishop^{1*}, A Adams², E Aizlewood¹, G Lewith¹

From International Research Congress on Integrative Medicine and Health 2012
Portland, Oregon, USA. 15-18 May 2012

Purpose

Despite the prevalence and ethically contentious nature of the use of placebos in clinical practice and clinical trials, few studies have explored the perspectives of the general public. Our aim was to identify how lay people conceptualise and reason around the use of placebos in healthcare.

Methods

Eleven focus groups were held with adult volunteers. Participants were purposefully recruited from rural and urban areas in the Midlands and South of England. They came from a range of walks of life, including students, professionals, home-makers, and retired people. Inductive thematic analysis was facilitated by Atlas.ti.

Results

All participants recognised the term 'placebo' and exhibited diverse opinions as to how the placebo effect works and whether the placebo effect even exists. Honest doctor-patient communication was highly valued by participants, who typically saw placebo prescriptions as deceitful and therefore wrong. However, they also expressed the belief that that deception is necessary for the patient to experience potentially beneficial placebo effects. A pragmatic orientation was exhibited, wherein participants argued that if a placebo "works" then it is acceptable for a doctor to prescribe it. Placebos were considered more acceptable in certain circumstances, including self-limiting illness (e.g. common cold) and clinical trials (compared to clinical practice).

Conclusion

Both a pragmatic orientation and an understanding of mind-body healing mechanisms seem to facilitate greater

acceptance of placebos in medical research and clinical practice. Seeing deception as necessary to elicit placebo effects seems to prompt ethical concerns about the use of placebo in clinical practice. The views of the general public should be taken into account when researchers and doctors consider using placebos; these findings could be used to inform the development of more acceptable practices related to the use of placebos.

Author details

¹University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom. ²Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, USA.

Published: 12 June 2012

doi:10.1186/1472-6882-12-S1-P396

Cite this article as: Bishop et al.: P05.36. How do lay people conceptualise and reason about the use of placebos in healthcare? *BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 2012 **12**(Suppl 1):P396.

Submit your next manuscript to BioMed Central and take full advantage of:

- Convenient online submission
- Thorough peer review
- No space constraints or color figure charges
- Immediate publication on acceptance
- Inclusion in PubMed, CAS, Scopus and Google Scholar
- Research which is freely available for redistribution

Submit your manuscript at
www.biomedcentral.com/submit



¹University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom
Full list of author information is available at the end of the article