

was not a placebo, because previously there had been no way to distinguish between placebo and nonplacebo. But the placebo effect flourished as the norm of medical treatment even after the beginning of modern scientific medicine seven or eight decades ago (Shapiro, 1959, 1960a).

These considerations have led to the famous admonition: *Treat as many patients as possible with the new remedies while they still have the power to heal.*

DEFINITION OF PLACEBO

The history of the placebo begins with the Hebrew Bible. The first word of Psalm 166:9 is "Ethalech," which was translated into the Latin Bible as "placebo." The word "placebo" is derived from the verb "placere," meaning "to please" (Murray, 1933). "Placebo" entered the English language in the twelfth century by becoming the name commonly given to vespers for the dead, a custom that is no longer followed and whose meaning is now obscure (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911).

"Placebo" took on a secular meaning in the fourteenth century and its connotations gradually became derisive during the next several centuries. The word was used to describe a servile flatterer, sycophant, toady, and parasite. The usage derives from disparagement of the professional mourners who were paid to "sing placebos" at the bier of the deceased, a role originally assigned to the family.

Few people realize that medical dictionaries have limited their definitions of the placebo to inert or inactive drugs only during the last three decades (Blakiston's *New Gould Medical Dictionary*, 1949). The original that appeared in the 1785 edition of *Motherby's New Medical Dictionary* (1795) was: "A commonplace method or medicine."

This original definition was misquoted as a "commonplace method of medicine." This error in the etymology of placebo has influenced the meaning attributed to the word. The distinction between "of" or "or" is important, since the former limits the definition to medicine, whereas the latter includes methods and medicines. Although the original definition included all therapies, as drugs be-

came more important in medical theory and practice, the term became limited to pharmacologic interventions. This continued until 1949 when medical dictionaries, partly owing to their perpetuation of early errors, began to limit the definition to inert substances. Such interpretation has influenced the thinking of many physicians and nonphysicians, who conceive of placebos only as inert drugs. Recently, as treatments have changed and psychotherapy has become more prominent, definitions of placebo have expanded and now are more like the original definition that appeared in 1785.

Our proposed definition, which we believe fulfills historic and heuristic criteria, follows:

A *placebo* is defined as any therapy or component of therapy that is deliberately used for its nonspecific, psychological, or psychophysiological effect, or that is used for its presumed specific effect, but is without specific activity for the condition being treated.

A *placebo*, when used as a control in experimental studies, is defined as a substance or procedure that is without specific activity for the condition being evaluated.

The *placebo effect* is defined as the psychological or psychophysiological effect produced by placebos.

There are several important features of this definition. There are no assumptions made about the intent of the therapist to issue placebo therapy. The therapist may knowingly give placebo treatment. Conversely, he or she may administer placebos in the belief that they are specific and active but by *objective evaluation* the therapy does not have specific activity for the condition under treatment. There are also no assumptions made about the effects of therapy. Placebos may have positive, negative, or no effect. Placebos may or may not induce side effects.

Implicit in this definition is the assumption that active treatments may contain placebo components. Even with specific therapies results are apt to be due to the combination of both placebo and nonplacebo effects. Treatments that are devoid of