The Placebo Effect in Complementary Medicine
– a radical rethink of “healers’ wisdom”

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This paper was first published as a chapter in the Level 1 Reference Point Therapy manual in September 2009. References to the RPT techniques such as “acknowledgment” are references to chapters in that manual.

Executive summary

Healing practitioners are attached to the idea that their technique “works.” The existence of grateful testimonials convinces the practitioner that they are indeed performing the miraculous. However this is magical thinking. Unless the healing practitioner has a success rate at least as high as a “sugar pill” placebo, those testimonials mean nothing.

The new technique of Reference Point Therapy offers a new insight into why placebos are so effective. The success of RPT suggests that it is the delivery of the placebo, not its contents, that matters. This explains why healing techniques like homeopathy can never truly be placebo tested.

Healing practitioners should concentrate on results. It is possible to achieve a success rate of over 90%, and this alone will dispel the medical lobby’s stigma of complementary medicine as placebo.

The Placebo Effect in Complementary Medicine

You have probably heard of the placebo effect – the idea that taking an inactive substance like sugar can have the same healing effect as traditional medicine. It’s not just pills – even surgery has been shown to have a placebo effect. Sometimes just making a cut is just as effective as doing the surgery. Perhaps this suggests that the real healing occurs when you take action (such as going to the doctor).

The medical definition of a placebo effect is the phenomenon that a patient’s symptoms can be alleviated by an otherwise ineffective treatment, apparently because the individual expects or believes that it will work. [emphasis added]

Alternative therapists love the placebo effect. Indeed many “scientific” books about healing and spirituality focus in great detail on how medical treatments such as chemotherapy may be mostly a placebo effect (such as *Holographic Universe* and *The Field* – see bibliography).

Healers and spiritual teachers love to cite the placebo effect to criticize allopathic medicine and its reliance on drugs. It’s true that every doctor needs to understand the placebo effect. However, the real impact of the placebo effect lies closer to home. All practitioners and teachers of complementary and alternative medicine (“CAM”) need to be aware that at least some of their success is due to the placebo effect. In fact many techniques have a success rate *less than you would expect* from the placebo effect. Selling a cure that is less effective than the placebo is bad medicine – whether it comes from a doctor or a healer.

The comments in this chapter apply particularly to *physical healings*, especially claims of “instant healings.” Emotional healing also has a placebo effect but the medical issues are different. It has been pointed out to me by my students that energy healing techniques like Reiki are very effective (much more than a placebo) in alleviating pain for a while. This is true – but this isn’t the type of healing I am talking about. For this chapter it only counts as a healing if it’s a **permanent** improvement, preferably of the underlying cause of the problem (not just a symptom such a pain).

The scientific evidence so far convincingly demonstrates that **all established alternative healing modalities are placebos**.

To quote:

"There is no compelling, credible scientific evidence to suggest that any CAM therapy benefits any medical condition or reduces any medical symptom (pain or otherwise) better than a placebo."

"No CAM therapy has a scientifically plausible biochemical mechanism of action over and above those proposed for the placebo effect."


A good one page summary of the book can be found at: http://dannyreviews.com/h/Snake_Oil_Science.html.
It’s important to note, **this does not mean that alternative and complementary therapy doesn’t work.** To the contrary, **it does work.** This is why scientists are investigating it – to see why it works. It turns out that either

(a) the **main reason** why CAM works is because of the placebo effect; or
(b) it works for some other reason, but we can’t prove it’s more effective than a placebo.

Either way, this is something that **every responsible CAM practitioner must understand.**

Bausell’s book is important reading for all alternative healing practitioners because he is not anti-alternative healing. He is bringing science and rationality into healing. Bausell writes:

"The placebo effect … occurs only in the presence of the belief that an intervention (or therapy) is capable of exerting this effect. This belief can be instilled through classical conditioning, or simply by the suggestion of a respected individual that this intervention (or therapy) can reduce pain."

This is important. The difference between a good alternative practitioner (whether chiropractor, naturopath or spiritual healer) and a fraud lies in their belief that they are helping their clients. That belief alone can create a powerful enough effect to create a healing.

**Why are you reading this in a manual about a complementary therapy?**

All doctors and complementary healing practitioners need to be aware about the placebo effect. Just as an oncologist (cancer specialist) must ask “is this new chemotherapy better than a placebo?”, you too should ask “is this healing technique I use better than a placebo?”

The oncologist can test the placebo by giving the clients a sugar pill. Remarkably, about 30% of patients taking the sugar pill lose their hair and have other chemotherapy side effects because they believe they are going to (source: Talbot, *Holographic Universe*, page 97). In other words, even if it’s a pure placebo you have symptoms of the treatment working (side effects included).

The same pattern applies to energy healing work but it’s harder to test because we don’t have a simple “sugar pill.” You can never fully separate the healer from the healing. You can’t just “pretend” to do the healing – and in fact that’s an ironic turn of phrase because the exact RPT technique is to **pretend to do the healing.** In other words it is almost impossible to scientifically refute the possibility that what we do is a placebo effect.
Example: Is homeopathy a placebo? Or is it a form of RPT?!

Let me give a simple example: there have been many scientific studies of homeopathy. Results are mixed. In short – it works: people get better. But people given a placebo (a sugar pill that does not contain the homeopathic remedy) also get better. There is no significant difference in the success rates between those given the remedy and those given the placebo. There have been hundreds of trials and the vast majority support this conclusion – that homeopathy does not heal better than the placebo. **This doesn't mean that homeopathy doesn't work – only that the remedy cannot be distinguished from the placebo.** For more information and data refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeopathy.

We believe that homeopathy does work, but in a way that might surprise you. We think that a good homeopath can heal a patient even with sugar pills, in the same way that a good kinesiologist can work without muscle testing or a great counselor can work without the client saying anything. In other words there is a deeper mechanism at work, little understood, which scientists paint as the placebo. If we know what this “placebo” is, we can explain how homeopathy works even with just sugar pills. If we isolate this missing ingredient, we can use it to create an extraordinarily effective healing technique.

**So what's the missing “placebo” ingredient?**

A good homeopath spends quality time with the client to get to the source of the problem and prescribe the correct remedy. The results show that lots of the clients get better – regardless of whether they get the real remedy or a placebo.

The medical profession will tell you that this proves that homeopathy is a placebo. But we have a totally different conclusion: we believe that homeopathy works, but not because of the remedy. It works because the homeopath spent time with the client to get to the underlying cause. The act of prescribing the correct remedy acknowledges the underlying cause. In other words, the moment at which a homeopath says “the problem seems to be this, and I prescribe this remedy” they are acknowledging the vibration which caused the condition, and the vibration which will heal it. The client doesn't actually need to ingest the remedy (vibration) – that's why the clients who took the placebo still got better. It's the **acknowledgment** of the vibration that heals, not ingesting it.

In RPT terms (see next chapter) this is actually a successful RPT healing. So you see, we cannot prove that RPT or homeopathy or indeed any CAM is not a placebo – because the reason why it works may have little or perhaps nothing to do with the taking the substance. You simply cannot test CAM using the same procedures as pharmaceutical medicine because CAM does not rely on you ingesting the chemical. (This comment relates to energy medicine, not herbalism or Traditional Chinese Medicine.)
The placebo group in CAM will always heal because it’s not the placebo that’s doing the healing. This creates a problem. If (as we believe) the actual healing works through acknowledgment and not the physical remedy then you can never really placebo test any CAM.

**A totally new take on the placebo effect**

This new insight means that scientists will have to totally re-think the placebo effect. It turns out that it’s not the treatment that’s healing people, it’s the *delivery mechanism*. It’s not the drug (or sugar pill) that cures but the doctor’s confidence. Similarly it’s not the homeopathy (or sugar pill) that cures but the homeopath’s time in recognizing and acknowledging the underlying issues.

The reason why we cannot prove CAM is more effective than a placebo is because the accepted practice for placebo tests is a test of the treatment, not a test of the delivery system itself.

It is difficult to think of a better testing protocol to isolate the “delivery effect.” For instance it’s hard to separate homeopathy from the time taken by the homeopath for the simple reason that even if homeopathy does work, it only really works if you take the time to get the correct remedy. The treatment is such an integral part of the process that it cannot really be separately tested.

**So how do we know if complementary healing actually works?**

We simply cannot placebo test CAM because you can never really isolate the placebo. You need to create different tests.

We have decided to focus simply on outcomes. The one thing we can measure and record is our success rate. We have been inspired by the Institute of Peak States to aim for a 100% success rate. That to us is the proof that a technique works.

At the end of the day, it *doesn’t actually matter whether it’s a placebo* or not, all the matters is that the clients consistently get the results they were seeking.

**What are the success rates of complementary healing techniques?**

It is difficult to research reputable results for the success rates of complementary healing techniques for the same reason that it is hard to test the placebo effect – because it is impossible to separate the healer from the healing. This means that even within a given healing modality two different healers will get very different results. This means that strictly speaking we cannot measure the success rates of a technique so much as the success rates of an individual. It is hard to generalize and compare results.
Our experiences and observations are as follows. We have seen many wonderful modalities where the founder of the modality has extraordinary healing success, with many documented case studies. Good examples include Matrix Energetics™, The Reconnection™ and Crystal Light Bed Therapy. However, in these modalities, we have never met a certified practitioner who achieved the same results as those exhibited by the founder. It is our personal belief that those three founders (Richard Bartlett, Eric Pearl and John of God, respectively) are doing something amazing which goes well beyond the placebo effect. However those practitioners applying their work are getting results within the 0-40% range consistent with the placebo effect. Again, I emphasize, we are not saying that the techniques don’t work. We are only saying that you cannot prove to a skeptical medical community that they work better than a placebo.

We lack any hard data but our industry experience tells us that the average success rates for these and other modalities is in the range of 5-20% (gut feeling says it is about 10%, i.e. one in 10 people seeing an energy healer gets the physical healing result they were seeking). On the one hand, even 10% of “cures” or healings is amazing and explains the wonderful testimonials you read on many healers’ web sites. On the other hand it’s actually less success than science predicts you would get from a sugar pill.

In other words, even the best healing practitioners in the world are getting results that are below what you expect just from a placebo effect. Think about that! If the energy healers stop doing their energy work and just give the client a small white sugar pill, telling them in a convincing manner that this is a proven cure, then they should expect to get up to four times the healing success than they are getting from so called “miracle healing” modalities!

This is such a problem that the USA Federal Trade Commission now has laws restricting healers using testimonials to promote their work. If you promote services in or to the USA you should read their guide: http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2009/10/endortest.shtm. The FTC’s intention is that businesses (including healing practitioners) must promote their work based on normal expected outcomes for the majority of clients, not the miracles that 10% of them might have received.

What sort of results should we expect?

We’ve explained that most if not all established healing techniques get physical healing results less than 40% (and probably under 10%) of the time. We emphasize physical healing results because they are more measurable. Emotional healing or short-term pain relief are easier to create, and more likely to be a placebo (since they exist in the mind in the first place).
Grant McFetridge, author of *Peak States*, has suggested that the success rate we should expect from healing work is 100%. Anything less is just leaving it to chance. Grant is something of a perfectionist – he does not classify one of his techniques as effective unless it is 100% effective at helping people to reach a specific peak state. Grant won’t teach a technique or let his practitioners use a technique on the public until he has 100% success and 100% safety.

This is the only spiritual or healing related teacher we have heard of who can claim that he is doing something more than a placebo. As far as we are concerned, every other modality we have learned is a placebo effect (with results less than 40% effectiveness). We emphasize again, this doesn’t mean that energy healing doesn’t work, only that you cannot prove to a skeptical audience that it does something more than a placebo.

(To avoid confusion at this point, please recall that Grant’s Peak States work is not a healing modality. It is a tool for achieving higher states of consciousness. There are no healing modalities yet which can claim 100% effectiveness.)

**Where does Reference Point Therapy fit in?**

It is only a year since Simon and Evette launched RPT. We simply don’t yet have the data to be precise. McFetridge researched for more than 10 years before sharing his findings. We are less cautious – we are willing to teach something without proof that it is 100% effective based on what we know so far (which is why we are being so transparent with you about this). What we know so far is that it is safe and that it is much more effective than all the other healing techniques we have ever studied. That’s enough for us.

We are satisfied that RPT is *extraordinarily effective*. We have had near perfect success helping people who did not get any results from years’ spent working with other modalities. Bear in mind that RPT is primarily an emotional healing technique that has benefits for physical blocks. It is not primarily a physical healing technique. Anecdotally here is what we believe:

- we have about 90-95% success in clearing abuse issues and trauma. Only 1 client has told us that the healing was not at all successful. She agreed with us that this was because of the secondary gain issues she was not ready to clear;
- we have about 90-95% success in clearing a wide range of emotional blocks such as worthiness issues, depression, guilt, grief, anger, rage, etc;
- we have about 80-90% success with clearing abundance blocks and money issues. In fact, only one client has ever reported lack of satisfaction with results and this client only had one session and refused to book a second session despite clearing having plenty more to work on. We take from this that some people really need 2-3 sessions before the success can be guaranteed;
- we estimate 80-90% success with muscular-skeletal issues, such as back and shoulder pain. All clients had a measurable improvement in terms of pain level, movement (reach) and coordination, but not all had 100% healing of a condition;

- we are not yet able to publish or claim success rates for conditions such as cancer. We have had considerable anecdotal success, though not 100%. There are so many legal issues and problems about making claims to do with healing cancer or other serious medical conditions that we are not publishing data other than testimonials at this time. There are also so many variables such as the stage of progression of the cancer, whether the client has had surgery or chemotherapy, etc. Our hope is to perfect and publish our work in cancer therapy over the next few years.

More information on techniques and success rates for physical healings is included in the Level 3 course, Mastering the Miraculous.

What is very important, for both RPT and Peak States, is that the success rates do not seem to vary considerably between practitioners. Obviously there is a learning curve – it takes some practice to master the techniques. With practice, the student can get the same results as the teacher. This means that healing sessions taken with Simon or Evette are not significantly more effective than those with other experienced RPT practitioners (i.e. Level 3 graduates).

There is a very distinct possibility that with another 2-3 years' research, RPT practitioners will have scientific proof of a 90-100% success rate for physical healings. In order to do this we need to collect considerable amounts of data including before and after medical tests.

To help collect this data RPT is supporting the Million Person Trials, a project affiliated with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The goal of the Trials is to collect one million case studies of different therapies from around the world, to establish the effectiveness of the therapies. This is the first ever large trial that includes both Western and complementary healing techniques. Over the next year we will be asking all our RPT practitioners (Level 2 graduates) to keep case studies in a format that can be provided anonymously to the trial. For more information you can visit http://www.millionpeopletrials.com/ (the website is under development and is still fairly basic but will be updated).

To help our practitioners achieve close to 100% success rates we need to share our insights and success with each other. It is our belief that there are specific vibrations or Reference Points that correspond to different emotional or physical blocks. We are therefore creating a new website database where all RPT practitioners can share their insights about any healing – sorted by disease and trauma. Valeria Moore is managing this and it will be a natural extension of her existing Healer Wisdom: Beliefs by Disease and Trauma. The belief work aspect
of her work will be upgraded to categorization of key reference points. The early version of this database has been launched on our new RPT forum (www.RPTforum.com) which is available to all RPT practitioners.

Our conclusion

We can never really say for sure that what we do isn’t a placebo. All healing is partly placebo because if people didn’t believe it would work they wouldn’t spend money on it. Ultimately we believe all that really matters is the success rate. Apart from RPT (offering general healing work) and Peak States (achieving higher states of consciousness) we have not found any healing techniques that can show any evidence for a success rate above about 20%.

A success rate of 20% is still a “good thing” – that’s thousands of people being healed. On the other hand it suggests that these healing techniques are operating at 20% less effectiveness than a sugar pill! That’s a lot of money and time being wasted, albeit with good intentions.

We firmly believe that we have developed a technique which will generate 90-100% success. This is the only real test and proof of a technique. At this time we lack the data to show you conclusive proof – RPT is still new. With your help and that of the other RPT practitioners, through the Million Persons Trial, we will have the data we need to establish that healing work can be 90% (or more) effective. (You can never prove it’s not a placebo, but you can prove it works.)