Placebo, Nocebo and the Power Inside

The video by Dr Ben Goldacre author of Bad Science and Bad Pharma shares powerful information on the power and susceptibility to placebo. He tells us what placebo is and how it works. Dr. Goldacre shares we need to use healing environments and the power of peace and motivation but we must maintain medical integrity. Do No Harm means no betrayal of trust by lying to patients or overselling benefits of an intervention.

The nocebo effect which is the opposite of placebo is also discussed. The placebo effect is powerful, real and controversial. It is no respecter of persons or cultures or socioeconomic status. We see the term placebo and nocebo hurled like a weapon at practices offering interventions without evidence and we can watch the placebo effect used as a powerful marketing tool through ‘infomercials’ that bring the image of promise to areas where there is little hope. When we are ill we want to be the one that beat the odds or that the wonder drug worked for. Some have even used it to denigrate the power of prayer. Few stop to realize that to say something is only a placebo effect without offering valid evidence is no more scientific than talking about research without evidence in any other way.

Placebos were first used in research to examine experimental results to see if people would get better on their own just as well without an intervention or whether the intervention really made a difference. For instance some people can lose weight by taking inactive diet pills if they believe they will work and some drugs like those used for Parkinson’s disease can be substituted for very short periods with sugar pills because the body is tricked into preparing for the drug and it
sends signals to the brain that all is well when it is not. This is a little like having the petrol meter break on the car. All is well when there is any gas at all but eventually the car just stops because in the end it needs gas to run. Sometimes we see this effect when an ill person wants very much to be well to see a loved one. They use all their energy and believe they are better but after the visitors go and exhaustion sets in illness returns. Did they suddenly get well? The answer is no but in anticipation of recovery the brain drew on its strength, released special chemicals and rallied to the occasion. This is why when you see healing ‘testimonials’ it is important to check on the long-term outcomes and the evidence that supports them.

This next video is excellent, short and funny. Here the teachers explain how placebo works.