Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”

Daniel E. Moerman presents an innovative and enlightening discussion of human reaction to the meaning of medical treatment. Many things happen in medicine that cannot be attributed to specific elements, such as drugs or surgical procedures. The same drug can work differently when presented in different colors; inert drugs (placebos, dummies) often have dramatic effects on people (the “placebo effect”); and effects can vary hugely among different European countries where the “same” medical condition is understood differently, or has different meanings, yielding different meaning responses. This lively book reviews and analyzes these matters in lucid, straightforward prose, guiding the reader through a very complex body of literature, leaving nothing unexplained but avoiding any oversimplification.

DANIEL E. MOERMAN is William E. Stirton Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He is a fellow of the American Anthropological Association and Secretary of the International Society for Ethnopharmacology. His recent book Native American Ethnobotany (1998) received the “Annual Literature Award” of the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries for 2000.
Medical anthropology is the fastest growing specialist area within anthropology, both in North America and in Europe. Beginning as an applied field serving public health specialists, medical anthropology now provides a significant forum for many of the most urgent debates in anthropology and the humanities. It includes the study of medical institutions and health care in a variety of rich and poor societies, the investigation of the cultural construction of illness, and the analysis of ideas about the body, birth, maturity, ageing, and death.

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Meaning, Medicine, and the “Placebo Effect”

Daniel E. Moerman

University of Michigan-Dearborn
For Claudine,
with admiration, affection, and love
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I wrote my first scholarly article about issues discussed in this book in 1979. I have, then, worked on and thought about the matter for about twenty-five years. The University of Michigan-Dearborn has been my professional home for that entire period; I owe a great debt to colleagues — both faculty, staff and administrators — who, in that time, have supported me intellectually and institutionally. Among them are Victor Wong, Jim Foster, John Presley, Paul Wong, Robert Simpson, and Dan Little, all administrators who have strongly supported the principle of the teacher-scholar which created the opportunity for the work. Drew Buchanan provided invaluable technical and personal support; Bob Fraser provided those, plus helpful counsel on biblical translations. Department chairs Don Levin, Rick Straub and Barry Bogin provided ample real support in time, equipment, and space for my various efforts. Many colleagues, too, helped by reading chapters or the whole text, or by engaging in discussion about both the larger and the smaller issues one confronts in such work. Among those who were particularly helpful were Paul Zitzewitz, John Gillespie, Dan Swift, Barry Bogin, and Katie Anderson-Levitt. In a class by himself is Larry Radine who helped me over what seemed at the time to be an insurmountable obstacle; thanks, Larry. Colleagues from around the US and Europe also helped in many ways: Bob Ader, Mirielle Belloni, Steve Bolling, Loring Brace, Howard Brody, Claire Cassidy, Nicholas Christakis, Tom Csordas, Ton de Craen, Susan DiGiacomo, Linda Engel, Michel Gabrielli, Rick Gracely, Harry Guess, Robert Hahn, Ellen Idler, Wayne Jonas, Ted Kaptchuk, Irving Kirsch, Martin Leon, Claude Levi-Strauss, Shirley Lindenbaum, Margaret Lock, Bruce Moseley, John Payer, Lola Romanucci-Ross, John Ross, Pat Rozee, Bill Stebbins, Jon Stoessl, Sjaak van der Geest, and Andrew Vickers all helped in one way or the other, large or small, sometimes not really knowing that our conversations were going to end up here (I may not have known it at the time either). Bill McGrew provided the photo of “chimpanzee dentistry,” and also was a valuable advisor on other matters regarding primates. Although it didn’t start until the book was half done, the “Placebo Group,”
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I have had great fun with this project; I kept telling myself how easy it would be to write a “placebo book” because it doesn’t have anything in it.

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