

# Cambridge Elements

Elements in Bioethics and Neuroethics  
edited by  
Thomasine Kushner  
*California Pacific Medical Center, San Francisco*

## WHAT PLACEBOS TEACH US ABOUT HEALTH AND CARE

*A Philosopher Pops a Pill*

Dien Ho  
*Massachusetts College of Pharmacy  
and Health Sciences*

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-45445-2 — What Placebos Teach Us about Health and Care  
A Philosopher Pops a Pill  
Dien Ho  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of  
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009454452](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009454452)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009085496

© Dien Ho 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions  
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take  
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-009-45445-2 Hardback  
ISBN 978-1-009-08793-3 Paperback  
ISSN 2752-3934 (online)  
ISSN 2752-3926 (print)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence  
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this  
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will  
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Every effort has been made in preparing this Element to provide accurate and  
up-to-date information which is in accord with accepted standards and practice at the  
time of publication. Although case histories are drawn from actual cases, every effort  
has been made to disguise the identities of the individuals involved. Nevertheless, the  
authors, editors, and publishers can make no warranties that the information  
contained herein is totally free from error, not least because clinical standards are  
constantly changing through research and regulation. The authors, editors, and  
publishers therefore disclaim all liability for direct or consequential damages resulting  
from the use of material contained in this Element. Readers are strongly advised to pay  
careful attention to information provided by the manufacturer of any drugs or  
equipment that they plan to use.

## What Placebos Teach Us about Health and Care

### A Philosopher Pops a Pill

Elements in Bioethics and Neuroethics

DOI: 10.1017/9781009085496  
First published online: September 2023

---

Dien Ho

*Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences*

**Author for correspondence:** Dien Ho, [dien.ho@mcphs.edu](mailto:dien.ho@mcphs.edu)

**Abstract:** Placebo effects raise some fundamental questions concerning the nature of clinical and medical research. This Element begins with an overview of the different roles placebos play, followed by a survey of significant studies and dominant views about placebo mechanisms. It then critically examines the concept of *placebo* and offers a new definition that avoids the pitfalls of other attempts. The main philosophical lesson is that background medical theories provide the ontology for clinical and medical research. Because these theories often contain incoherent and arbitrary classifications, the concept of *placebo* inherits the same messiness. The Element concludes by highlighting some impending challenges for placebo studies.

**Keywords:** placebo, philosophy of medicine, placebo therapy, health humanities, healthcare

© Dien Ho 2023

ISBNs: 9781009454452 (HB), 9781009087933 (PB), 9781009085496 (OC)  
ISSNs: 2752-3934 (online), 2752-3926 (print)

Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 1  |
| 1 History and Conceptual Landscape  | 2  |
| 2 A Survey of Placebo Studies   | 11 |
| 3 Mechanisms of Placebo Effects   | 23 |
| 4 Philosophical Implications of Placebos:<br>From the Elusiveness of Placebos to the Challenge<br>of Authenticity | 38 |
| 5 The Near Future of Placebo Research   | 56 |
| Notes   | 70 |
| References  | 73 |