

ideal medium for bacterial growth. Trueta reported that the terrible infection rate of previous wars could be prevented by early débridement of all penetrating and perforating wounds, that is, the enlargement of the wound at the entrance and exit (if one existed). All the dead and devitalized muscle and other tissue were removed until the muscle bled, indicating it was clean and viable muscle. The wounds were then left open. Pressure dressing followed, and splints applied

when indicated. In approximately 7 days, if the wound were clean, it was closed.

Prior to the invasion, along with a group of doctors, I went to London to hear Trueta speak about his findings. It was all very new, and I was enthralled with his solution to the problem of infection. After the lecture, Laurie Rabson, my Chief of Surgery, said in great excitement, "Of course. That's the way we are going to do it!"

Professor Trueta's work was enthu-

siastically incorporated in the battle plan in the desert, Italy and Europe. The results were indeed rewarding. The answer to the infected wound and gangrene had arrived. The hospital mortality rate was reduced to 4.5% (3 times less than in WWI) with obvious reduction in morbidity. In our opinion, Trueta was a war surgeon hero.

— Excerpt from the memoir *Not Least in the Crusade: the Memoirs of a Military Surgeon*, 2005, Angus Campbell Derby

## Book review

# The placebo effect deserves our time

**The placebo effect and health: combining science & compassionate care**

W. Grant Thompson

Prometheus Books; 2005

350 pp \$23.00 ISBN 1-59102-275-4

**G**rant Thompson, a gastroenterologist, has written a reasoned, careful analysis of many aspects of current health systems and how they have evolved. He writes very clearly and logically.

Physicians, and particularly family doctors, must have the time and appropriate technology to practise what Thompson clearly feels is the backbone of medical care in our society. Rushed medicine without the ability to access proper informative medical documentation is deplored and deservedly so — unfortunately, we all acknowledge that this lack of time and technology is still usually the norm in Canadian medicine.

But why such an emphasis on "the placebo effect"? Thompson carefully defines, describes and details the role of placebo in research. Doctors' behaviours in themselves can be placebos and correspondingly "nocebos" or negative behaviour producers.

I wish that Thompson had written about how long the placebo response

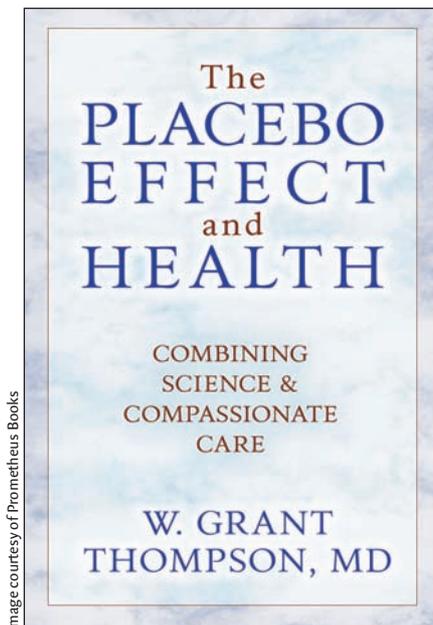


Image courtesy of Prometheus Books

lasted in the various studies cited. This reviewer believes in the concept of placebo. I would like medical students, residents and doctors to think in greater detail about how their actions influence the therapeutic response in their patients: how what they are saying and the way they say it can influence a patient's understanding of their illness (e.g., irritable bowel syndrome, low-back pain or fibromyalgia). How eliciting specific psychological and social information

can contribute to patients' improvement at a biochemical, physiological and ultimately clinical level.

Thompson's formula for successful medical intervention includes seeking well-founded evidence-based medicine and an optimum medical system of family physicians and specialists working in technical and respectful harmony. Another "bottom line" gleaned from reading this book is that physicians have to care. We have to feel that what's going on between our patients and us is meaningful, worthwhile and actually works. We have to recognize as well that when we develop that unique patient-doctor bond, what we say and how we say it can be therapeutic in many ways.

The placebo and nocebo concepts are fine. Physicians are being urged by Dr. Thompson to get into the trenches and fight for the right to practise medicine the way we know it should be, before some of the bureaucrats and medical technocrats take over. Important facts and concepts are offered in this book to propel this argument forward.

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