

Drug Topics

THE NATIONAL NEWSPAPER FOR RETAIL DRUGGISTS

MAY 17, 1965

Johns Hopkins MDs Explore 'Placebo Effect'; 14 Patients Swear Sugar Pills Were Curative

BALTIMORE—The helpfulness of the pill—any pill—has now been tested to the far-out scientific limit. Fifteen ailing men and women were told by doctors here in a recent placebo study that the pills they were about to receive were sugar pills which contained no medicine whatever.

The doctors were not kidding; it was a fact. Yet 14 of the 15 took them three times a day for a week and all 14 felt better. The 15th didn't take them only because her husband told her it was silly to take pills which were not medicine.

Never before had medical science made such a forthright approach to understanding the "placebo effect" which doctors have been exploiting for the good of some of their patients for as long as there have been doctors. "Placebo" literally means "I shall please."

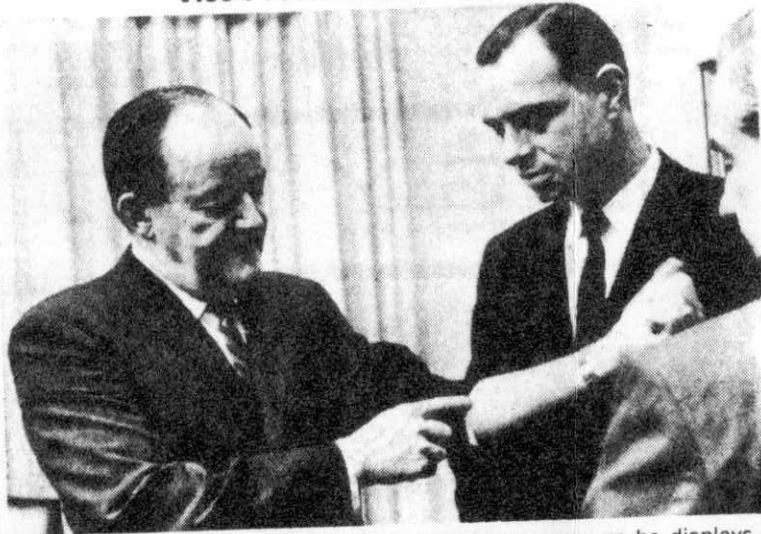
Most persons are pleased when they are taken seriously. Some are not pleased if a doctor suggests to them that their ailments are imaginary. When the doctor gravely writes a prescription and says to them, "this will make you feel better," they're pleased and often the "placebo" works.

Until now it had been considered

essential that the patient believe he was taking a potent medicine. Drs. Lee C. Park and Lino Covi of The Johns Hopkins University tested that assumption. They made the 15 patients understand "a sugar pill is a pill with no medicine in it," and

(Continued on Page 24, Column 1)

Vice Presidential Immunity?



Vice President Hubert Humphrey exhibits some concern as he displays a patch test he received on his left arm to determine whether he may be susceptible to the mumps. Late in April, Mr. Humphrey spent a night at the Executive Mansion in North Carolina. After he left, Governor Dan Moore came down with the mumps, a disease which Humphrey did not have in childhood. Executive secrecy shrouds the results of the test.

Sugar Pill Proves Therapeutic Effect In Johns Hopkins' Placebo Research

(Continued from Page 19, Col. 5) then said, "this pill will help you as it has so many others." And so the 15 went off with a week's supply of sugar pills and 14 came back later to tell the doctors the pills they knew were chemical "blanks" had really helped them.

Medically, all these patients were classified as neurotics. Their ailment was diagnosed as inescapable anxiety. Feeling better or feeling worse in response to a placebo seriously prescribed by a physician is considered by many scientists to be a neurotic trait.

Drs. Park and Covi chose to test neurotics because their "subjective symptoms of apprehension and helplessness" are known to respond in some instances to placebos as well as

to active drugs such as tranquilizers. Naturally they questioned the men and women who did so well on sugar pills.

Six of the 14 thought the doctors probably kidding them with their talk of sugar pills, and two of these six were positive they had been taking a potent medicine. The other eight believed all along they were taking sugar pills, but their faith in doctors caused them to think sugar might help.

"Many of the patients appeared satisfied with the treatment," Drs. Park and Covi said in their report to a technical publication of the American Medical Association. "At least five desired to continue the placebo treatment and two felt no need of further treatment."