

HEALTH CORNER





The Strange Power of Fake Pills

By Diana Gifford

I have been sorting through unpublished Gifford-Jones columns. Among them, I found a dusty clipping from a Reader's Digest article by Robert A. Siegel and a rough draft of this week's column. In it, we find a glimpse into a lecture hall at Harvard Medical School 75 years ago, and the teachings of Dr. Henry Beecher, the Harvard anesthetist who chal-

lenged the medical establishment's views about truth and healing. Beecher had stunned his class of medical students when he asked, "Is it ethical for doctors to prescribe a dummy pill — a pill that does no harm, never causes addiction, and yet often cures the patient?" He was speaking of a placebo. The lecture shocked his students who'd been taught that honesty was an unshakeable tenet of medical ethics. And yet Beecher showed that sometimes, deception can be powerful medicine.

Siegel's Reader's Digest story echoed this point. He described meeting Dr. John Kelley, a psychology professor at Endicott College who studies the placebo effect at Harvard. Curious, Siegel asked whether a "phony pill" might help him overcome his chronic writer's block, insomnia, and panic attacks. Kelley obliged with a prescription: 100 gold capsules – Siegel's favourite colour – costing \$405. Each one contained nothing but cellulose. And yet, Siegel found that the more expensive they seemed, the better they worked. The gold capsules helped him focus and stay calm. Even when drowsy, another capsule kept him writing.

Beecher published his groundbreaking paper "The Powerful Placebo" in 1955. He argued that all new drugs should be tested in double-blind trials so neither doctor nor patient knows who receives the real drug. The results were unsettling. Hundreds of supposedly effective drugs were found to be little more than expensive illusions. Many were pulled from the market.

Placebo therapy itself is ancient. And there's proof that belief predates biochemistry. In the medical lore, we're told doctors once prescribed crocodile dung or powdered donkey hoof, and sometimes they worked! Later, physicians injected sterile water to relieve pain, and to their surprise, many patients improved.

One study in 1959 found that when surgeons tied off an artery to increase blood supply as a treatment for angina, some patients reported relief. But when surgeons merely made a skin incision and did nothing else, the results were just as good. Ethics boards today would never allow such sham surgeries, yet they taught medicine an unforget-table lesson. The mind can profoundly influence the body.

Even more astonishing was later research at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Placebo pills improved urinary flow in men with enlarged prostates. Some of these same men also developed side effects so real that they had to stop taking the dummy pills altogether.

There is a popular account of a 26-year-old man who swallowed many capsules thinking they were antidepressants. But he was actually in the placebo arm of a trial. His blood pressure plummeted, his heart rate soared, but he stabilized when told the pills were placebos.

How do placebos work? The colour of the capsule, the cost, the trust in the physician, all play a role. Our expectations can spark real physiological change, from heart rate to pain relief

Beecher's lecture appalled some medical trainees. Others were intrigued. But all got the lesson. The placebo didn't deceive patients; it revealed the self-deception of medicine itself.

Of course, no placebo will mend a ruptured appendix or stop internal bleeding. But in an era when so many unnecessary prescriptions are written, perhaps it's time to remember the wisdom of Voltaire, who wrote, "The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease."

This column offers opinions on health and wellness, not personal medical advice. Visit www.docgiff.com to learn more. For comments, diana@docgiff.com. Follow on Instagram @diana gifford jones

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Helping the helpers: Fleming College launches research on resilience in nursing

- Fleming College has been awarded \$357,033 by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), in collaboration with the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The funding is provided through the College and Community Social Innovation Fund (CCSIF), one of the main grant types under the triagency College Community Innovation (CCI) program.

The grant will fund a threeyear applied research project aimed at improving nurse well-being at Peterborough Regional Health Centre (PRHC) through structured resilience training. The funding announcement was made on October 31 by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC).

The project is led by Fleming College faculty members Jill Henderson, MN, RN; Wendy Morgan, MA-Ed, MA-CP; and Melissa Sherrer, MN, RN, from Fleming's School of Health and Community Services. They are joined by Dr. Michael Ungar, Professor

and Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience at Dalhousie University.

"The nursing workforce in Canada faces severe challenges with devastating rates of burnout and projected shortages," said Dr. Theresa Knott, Acting Co-President, Fleming College. "A recent poll from the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions reports 40 per cent of nurses intend to leave the profession within the next year. This funding will help address these workforce pressures and strengthen the future of health care in Ontario and across the country."

The CCSIF-funded project builds on a successful pilot study led by Henderson and Morgan, previously funded by NSERC. In that study, the duo delivered resilience training to fourth-semester students in Fleming's Practical Nursing program. Their research demonstrated clear benefits: participants reported improvements in overall mental health, increased self-awareness, better emotional regulation, and greater confidence in managing stress. Many also valued the group-based

With this new funding, the research team will adapt and expand their resilience training model to support nurses at PRHC and study the impact of the training over time. The goal is to support nurses' psychological well-being, reduce burnout, and strengthen job satisfaction, which are all factors that play a critical role in improving retention and patient care outcomes. The study offers a scalable training model to shape best practices in nurse support provincially and nationally.

"Fleming College is proud to support the well-being of nurses already in the field through this important new resilience training," continued Dr. Knott. "While we remain committed to preparing career-ready nurses through our academic programs, this applied research project allows us to make a direct, meaningful impact on those currently serving in our healthcare system. It's a response to real needs in our community."

The project will also provide paid research opportunities for students from Fleming's School of Health and Community Services.

Treaties Recognition Week 2025

Greg Rickford, Minister of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation and Minister Responsible for Ring of Fire Economic and Community Partnerships, issued the following statement to mark the 10th annual Treaties Recognition Week:

"Treaties Recognition Week, marked each year during the first week of November, is a time to learn more about the more than 40 Treaties and agreements that shape our relationships with Indigenous communities across Ontario.

Ontario's prosperity is built on partnerships, and these agreements form the foundation for reconciliation and opening new pathways to shared economic prosperity. Ontario is proud to work in partnership with Indigenous communities on initiatives that support Indigenous equity participation in transformational projects, skills development and new investments in resource and energy projects to build a more competitive, resilient and self-reliant economy that benefits everyone.

This week and beyond, I encourage everyone to take time to learn about the Treaties that cover the land where you live, work or study. By deepening our understanding of these commitments, we strengthen our partnerships and continue working together to build a stronger, more prosperous Ontario for generations to come."



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