

UBC Department of Philosophy Colloquium



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Why it can be Ethical to Use Placebos In Clinical Practice

Placebo treatments are often prescribed by clinicians^{1,2}. Widespread use, of course, does not imply that such use is ethical, but merely that clinicians appear to be willing to prescribe them in spite of any potential ethical concerns. Placebo treatments are claimed to be unethical for two reasons. First: they are supposedly ineffective (or less effective than 'real' treatments), so the ethical requirement of beneficence (and 'relative' non-maleficence) makes their use unethical. Second: they allegedly require deception for their use, which violates patient autonomy. Here I will argue that in cases where placebos are effective options and they do not require deception they are arguably ethical. Importantly, questions about the magnitude of placebo effects and about whether placebos require deception are empirical questions with ethical implications rather than purely ethical ones. I will use an increasingly popular method called empirical philosophy to argue that contrary to received wisdom, it is unethical to not use placebos in routine practice.

FRIDAY, January 26th BUCH A103 4:00 – 6:00

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