

Junior B, Quarter Finals

“That doctors should be able to prescribe placebos without telling the patient it is a placebo”

1. Type of Topic

This is a normative debate. This means that the Affirmative should propose a ‘model’ (a policy or plan for how they will allow doctors to prescribe placebos without telling patients). This model should be clearly described to outline what changes the Affirmative team will make to the status quo, and how these changes will be enacted. The Negative team can either support the status quo or propose a counter-model. This counter-model must be different from the status quo, but also different from the model the Affirmative team is suggesting. The Negative team should ensure they clearly identify whether they are supporting the status quo or proposing a counter-model.

2. Background / Context

A placebo is a medicine that doesn’t contain any active ingredients. For example, if a doctor told someone they were giving them a painkilling pill, but actually gave them a sugar pill instead, this would be a placebo. While placebos don’t contain any medicine, they can still have a significant effect on someone’s symptoms. For example, placebos can relieve pain or reduce anxiety.

For a placebo to work, a patient usually has to be misled and told that they’re receiving an actual medicine instead of a placebo. This raises concerns about consent. Usually, a patient has to provide informed consent to any medical treatment before it can be prescribed. If a patient cannot be told that they’re taking a placebo, then they cannot provide informed consent.

In Australia, doctors are generally not allowed to prescribe placebos. In this debate, the affirmative has to argue that we should change this and allow doctors to prescribe placebos without telling the patient, while the negative is trying to argue that we should not allow doctors to prescribe placebos without telling patients.

3. Specific Questions for consideration

- For which patients might placebos be useful?
 - For which patients would placebos not be prescribed?
- How would doctors go about prescribing placebos?
- What are the advantages of placebos compared to other medicines?
- What are the disadvantages of placebos compared to other medicines?

- What are the ethical implications of prescribing placebos?
 - Is it unethical to prescribe placebos if informed consent can't be gained?
 - Can the deception required to prescribe placebos be justified?
 - Is it unethical to refuse to prescribe placebos when they could help patients?
- How would patients be affected by being prescribed placebos?
 - How might it affect patients' trust in doctors?
 - What would happen if a patient discovered that they'd been prescribed a placebo?

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