

## REPORT OF THE COUNCIL ON ETHICAL AND JUDICIAL AFFAIRS

CEJA Report 2-I-06

Subject: Placebo Use in Clinical Practice

Presented by: Robert M. Sade, MD, Chair

Referred to: Reference Committee on Amendments to Constitution and Bylaws  
(Francis X. Van Houten, MD, Chair)

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*The following recommendations were adopted as AMA Ethics Policy at the 2006 Interim Meeting of the AMA House of Delegates. The full report may be available online at <http://www.ama-assn.org/go/cejareports> or upon request by calling (312) 464-4823.*

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs recommends that the following be adopted and the remainder of this report be filed:

A placebo is a substance provided to a patient that the physician believes has no specific pharmacological effect upon the condition being treated. In the clinical setting, the use of a placebo without the patient's knowledge may undermine trust, compromise the patient-physician relationship, and result in medical harm to the patient.

Physicians may use placebos for diagnosis or treatment only if the patient is informed of and agrees to its use. A placebo may still be effective if the patient knows it will be used but cannot identify it and does not know the precise timing of its use. A physician should enlist the patient's cooperation by explaining that a better understanding of the medical condition could be achieved by evaluating the effects of different medications, including the placebo. The physician need neither identify the placebo nor seek specific consent before its administration. In this way, the physician respects the patient's autonomy and fosters a trusting relationship, while the patient still may benefit from the placebo effect.

A placebo must not be given merely to mollify a difficult patient, because doing so serves the convenience of the physician more than it promotes the patient's welfare. Physicians can avoid using a placebo, yet produce a placebo-like effect through the skillful use of reassurance and encouragement. In this way, the physician builds respect and trust, promotes the patient-physician relationship, and improves health outcomes.