

Ethics & Medical Research

The Ethical Use of Placebos

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- Franklin Miller, "The Ethics of Placebo-Controlled Trials", pp. 261–272.

Questions

1. What is the difference between placebo-controlled trials and active-controlled trials? What methodological considerations does Miller present in order to justify the superiority of placebo controls over active controls?
2. How does Miller understand equipoise and what is his argument justifying his claim that it is "fundamentally mistaken", especially when it comes to the ethics of placebo-controlled trials? Does this argument apply to all conceptions of equipoise, or just the specific conception that Miller considers?
3. What is the standard for evaluating the use of placebos in clinical trials that Miller believes should replace equipoise? Does his view offer more concrete guidelines for researchers (especially when it comes to determining the permissible placebo-induced risks to which an individual subject might be exposed)?