

Book Review

Cure: A Journey Into the Science of Mind Over Body, by Jo Marchant. New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2016, ISBN: 978-0-385-34813-7, 300 pages, \$26.00, hardcover.

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Jo Marchant, with a doctorate in genetics and microbiology, addresses mind–body dualism in a thorough and compelling manner in her book *Cure: A Journey Into the Science of Mind Over Body*. She sets the stage for her book by describing a meeting with a woman who explained how a certain homeopathic treatment had relieved her of severe eczema. Marchant’s scientific background tells her that homeopathic cures contain nothing of medical value, and she shares this knowledge with her acquaintance. But, the woman counters with the comment, “nothing measurable.” In Marchant’s view, that comment encapsulates what she refers to as one of the major philosophical battles in medicine today.

Marchant then introduces the two sides of the mind–body debate. First, there is mainstream Western medicine. She summarizes their position that the body is a machine that is best repaired by physical treatments. The opposition is, in Marchant’s words, everyone else. This includes primarily followers of ancient, alternative/complementary and Eastern medicine. The former group ridicules the latter for subscribing to a scientifically indefensible paradigm, whereas the latter group accuses the former of ignoring centuries of evidence suggesting that scientifically inexplicable cures are possible.

A key element of Marchant’s narrative is the placebo effect, the widely documented phenomenon in which patients respond favorably to a “fake” treatment. Marchant introduces the idea by describing efforts to treat autism with the hormone secretin and to treat vertebral fractures with surgery. In both cases, patients showed improvement whether they received the actual treatment or placebo. She provides further examples of the placebo effect throughout the book. Such effects may reflect the “healing” power of belief. Often, this effect is considered a nuisance, which must be carefully controlled in research design and analysis. Marchant offers the suggestion that rather than considering the placebo effect a nuisance, care providers could capitalize on it. For example, individuals with Parkinson’s disease who receive a placebo show improvements comparable to those seen in patients who receive an active medication.

The book is divided into two main sections. In the first section, Marchant begins each chapter by describing a meeting with either a patient suffering from a particular disorder or a health care provider or researcher studying the disorder. She includes such a variety of conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, HIV/AIDS, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and cancer. She then introduces some unorthodox form of treatment such as hypnotherapy, virtual reality, or Comfort Talk, which has been demonstrated to be effective. Comfort Talk uses “empathic communication skills, positive suggestion, and visual imagery” (p. 123) to relax patients prior to potentially painful or uncomfortable procedures.

In the second section, Marchant looks at efforts to modify disease risks throughout the lifespan. The focus here is on whether our state of mind influences long-term health. She examines whether mind-body therapies such as meditation and biofeedback can improve health. Additionally, she addresses the extent to which our perception of the world can influence our bodies.

Strengths

This is a thorough and well-documented treatment of a significant issue. Marchant writes in a very conversational tone, akin to Malcom Gladwell (e.g., *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, Gladwell, 2013). She presents research results in a straightforward and nontechnical manner. She also presents the weaknesses of the research clearly and concisely. The descriptions of the struggles faced by the patients she interviews are poignant.

Marchant also addresses the possible neurobiological mechanisms by which the unorthodox treatments may exert their effects. For example, in some studies, the brains of patients treated with placebo show increased levels of dopamine just as if the dopamine precursor L-3,4-dihydroxyphenylalanin had been administered. She also describes how mindfulness-based therapy may facilitate the rebuilding of neural circuitry damaged by stress. I think this is an important consideration for those who need to see that a treatment works but also understand how it works.

Weaknesses

I think the presentation would be stronger with at least some graphics. For example, when she describes various research approaches, a simple diagram would help the reader understand the design a little better. Likewise, some tables or graphs of results would make the results not only clearer but also perhaps more impactful. Another useful feature would be a comprehensive table presenting the research she has covered. It could be organized by condition or by treatment approach.

Marchant spends a lot of effort critiquing research findings, including design issues. It would help readers appreciate some of her critique if she began with a short section on the fundamental elements of a completely randomized placebo-controlled double-blind design.

Contributions

The main contribution of the book is to provide a balanced view of what is often a contentious debate. Marchant systematically describes a variety of medical conditions that are generally not sufficiently responsive to mainstream (i.e., Western) medical approaches such as drugs or surgery. She then describes the alternative approaches that provide relief to those suffering.

Suggested Audience

I think this work would be valuable to a variety of audiences. For scholars and researchers, it provides an informal meta-analysis of a variety of approaches to treating often intractable conditions. For patients suffering from such conditions, the book could offer hope of a better future. Likewise, for caregivers and loved ones of such sufferers, *Cure* offers hope. Another audience would be those frustrated at the accelerating cost of health care, because many of the treatments Marchant discusses are significantly less expensive than mainstream treatments.

Recommendations and Conclusions

I recommend this book strongly to anyone interested in becoming more familiar with complementary and alternative medicine approaches to healing. *Cure* provides an unbiased review that falls somewhere between those who scoff at techniques such as meditation or relaxation therapy and those who blindly advocate non-Western approaches to medicine.

Reference

Gladwell, M. (2013). *David and Goliath: Underdogs, misfits, and the art of battling giants*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books.

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