

**MODEL NUMBER 8  
OF A  
“PUBLIC AWARENESS ANALYZED EXAMPLE”**

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**WHERE:** This is found at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/24/health/24placebo.html>

**WHAT:** This is an article describing the results of a recent study that shows that many doctors frequently give their patients placebos instead of commonly recognized treatments known to have some direct effect on the patients' conditions. The lead of the article is:

Half of all American doctors responding to a nationwide survey say they regularly prescribe placebos to patients. The results trouble medical ethicists, who say more research is needed to determine whether doctors must deceive patients in order for placebos to work.

The study involved 679 internists and rheumatologists chosen randomly from a national list of such doctors. In response to three questions included as part of the larger survey, about half reported recommending placebos regularly. Surveys in Denmark, Israel, Britain, Sweden and New Zealand have found similar results.

Elsewhere in the article it is reported that 58% of survey subject said they were “moderately” or “very likely to recommend a sugar pill if it proved to be better than no treatment for fibromyalgia”.

**ANALYSIS:** We can discuss two topic for this example: one is the survey methodology itself (**sample size** of 679, how the sample was chosen, including issues like **voluntary response bias** and other problems); the other would be the very idea of doctors giving **placebos**.

**CRITICISM:** One weakness in this article is that it does not explain the **placebo effect** (much, or well). The ethical considerations are the main topic of the article, where it is pointed out that the doctors feel they are doing something worthwhile for their patients, since the (sugar pill) treatment does lead to improvement (that famous **effect!**), even if it is not a traditional, medical, physiological medicine.

At least the term **placebo** is used correctly in this article, and the ethical questions are clearly raised and discussed.