The Effect of Patient Beliefs About Treatment Allocation on Outcomes in Clinical Addiction Trials

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Background
In clinical trials participants are told that they have an equal chance of receiving either an active drug or placebo. Which of these they believe they have been given can have a profound impact on the way they respond to their treatment during the trial. We asked participants enrolled in a trial testing the efficacy of a cannabis agonist (nabiximols) for treating cannabis dependence to what treatment (nabiximols vs. placebo) they believed they had been assigned to, in order to determine if their beliefs predicted their response to treatment over and above their actual treatment.

Results: Actual Treatment predicting Believed Treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 8</th>
<th>Week 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plac</td>
<td>Nab</td>
<td>Plac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plac</td>
<td>20 (39%)</td>
<td>32 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nab</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
<td>43 (86%)</td>
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Note: Plac = Placebo, Nab = Nabiximols. Shading indicates cells where believed treatment did not match actual treatment.

- The Nabiximols group were 3.8 times more likely to believe they had received nabiximols at week 4 (p=0.007; CI 1.5, 10.8), 11.8 times at week 8 (p=0.002; CI 3.0, 79.8), and 5.0 times at week 12 (p=0.006; CI 1.7, 17.4).
- At all time points over half of the Placebo group believed they had been receiving nabiximols.

Results: Believed Treatment predicting Cannabis Use

- The 2 x 2 regressions were highly unbalanced due to very low numbers in the Received Nabiximols/Received Placebo group (see Table 1). Therefore days’ use was regressed on Believed Treatment at each level of Actual treatment.
- There were no significant differences in cannabis use due to Believed Treatment in the Received Nabiximols group.
- Days’ use was lower in the Believed Nabiximols group at all time points. Specifically
  - Week 4: estimate = -5.3 days; F_{32}=2.87; p=0.093
  - Week 8: estimate = -8.4 days; F_{32}=6.02; p=0.016
  - Week 12: estimate = -7.2 days; F_{32}=3.52; p=0.064
- All time points: estimate = -5.2 days; F_{123}=2.78; p=0.006

Discussion
Among the participants who received placebo, those who believed they had received nabiximols used significantly less cannabis than those who believed they had received placebo. This suggests that the belief one has received an agonist drug can reduce illicit drug use even in the absence of the active agent.

Disclosure of interest: Study drugs (nabiximols and placebo) were provided free of charge by GW pharmaceuticals.

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