

Nick Doe, *Be careful what you believe in for you may get it*, Flying Shingle, p.5, December 12, 2011.

Dear Editor

One thing that is perhaps in danger of being unjustly relegated to irrelevance in the Smart Meter debate is the topic of electro-sensitivity. I've never been in any doubt that this is a real phenomenon; some people really do get sick when they are aware that they are in an electromagnetic field, and telling them to "smarten up" is probably, in some cases, about as helpful as giving the same advice to somebody suffering from depression or with low self-esteem. Not being a doctor, I'm in no position to give such advice, nor would I, but I have read some of the research on this topic.

What is perfectly clear from masses of evidence is that exposure to low levels of electromagnetic radiation does not in itself cause the symptoms of electro-sensitivity. The phenomenon appears to be closely linked to, but opposite to, equally-mysterious effects such as the placebo effect, hypnosis (including self-hypnosis), and self-beneficial self-deception (including religion). Exactly how the brain uses beliefs to interact with the rest of the body to make you better, or in the case of electro-sensitivity, make you sick, is very poorly understood and is, I think, far more deserving of compassionate curiosity than derision.

Research into placebos is taken far more seriously than electro-sensitivity and so if you can accept that electro-sensitivity might be a reverse placebo effect, some interesting findings from the research emerge.

The first is that the more a person commits to a belief, the more the person needs to rationalize the belief, and the greater the rationalization, the greater the positive (or presumably negative) effects. This is perhaps why it is as difficult to argue say the rationality of religion as it is to try and persuade somebody that they are not really electro-sensitive.

Another factor, perhaps relevant in the Smart Meter debate, is that the greater the apparent authority of the source of information, the greater the effect. Doctors in white coats with stethoscopes can "sell" placebos more effectively; priests use medieval costumes to "sell" their dogmas; and (conjecture) people with lots of letters after their names can "sell" myths about electromagnetic radiation more convincingly.

The link with hypnosis is also fascinating. Apparently, roughly a third of the population responds strongly to placebos, a third shows only a moderate response, and for a third, placebos don't work at all. These proportions are similar to those measuring the ease with which people can be hypnotized, and moreover, there is a strong positive correlation between the two. If you are easily hypnotized, you are more likely to be made better by a placebo. The obvious, if perhaps a bit far fetched conclusion, is that if you are electro-sensitive, you may also be readily hypnotized, and perhaps self-hypnosis, albeit unconscious self-hypnosis, is a factor in this.

One of the lessons I draw from this research is that self-deception is an ability the brain uses freely and with great effect and not always for the better. The ability to self-deceive is without a doubt not confined to those who are electro-sensitive, and believe it or not, I include myself in this.

Sincerely  
Nick Doe. ◇

Sources:

Benedetti, F. (2009), *Placebo Effects: Understanding the Mechanisms in Health and Disease*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Gruzeller, J.H. (2002), *A review of the impact of hypnosis, relaxation, guided imagery and individual differences on aspects of immunity and health*, *Stress* 5:147–163.

Price, D.D., Finniss, D.G., & Benedetti, F., (2008), *A comprehensive review of the placebo effect: recent advances and current thought*, *Annual Review of Psychology* 59:565–590.

Shang, A. et al. (2005), *Are the clinical effects of homeopathy placebo effects? Comparative study of placebo-controlled trials of homeopathy and allopathy*, *Lancet* 366:726–732.

Trivers, R., (2011), *Neurophysiology and Levels of Imposed Self-Deception*, Chapter 3 in, *The Folly of Fools—the logic of deceit and self-deception in human life*, New York: Basic Books.