

Out to please

One of the most powerful cures from ancient times is the placebo. **By Noel O'Hare**

A most intriguing entry in the latest volume of *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* is that for Abraham Walley Mahomed Salaman. Salaman is described as a "merchant, dyer, herbalist, charlatan". It is on the last two that his fame or notoriety rests, and that raises some interesting questions about the nature of healing.

The son of an Indian herbalist, Salaman left India to travel the world when he was 14. In 1903, at the age of 18, he arrived in New Zealand, where he became a silk merchant. He began manufacturing dyes and during World War II was contracted to supply dyes for soldiers' khaki uniforms. By the early 1920s he had switched to herbalism, setting up business in Auckland's Khyber Pass Road. His herbal remedies appear to have been effective, because he quickly built up a large clientele.

However, in 1924, Agnes Stewart, a woman suffering from exophthalmic goitre, sued him for negligence. At the trial it was revealed that Salaman was using opium in his medicines and Stewart had become addicted. An analysis of the medicine Salaman had given her showed that only 15 of the 26 medicines contained herbs. He was found guilty of pretending to be a doctor and sentenced to one month's imprisonment. Agnes Stewart was awarded £600. She died two weeks later.

By 1930 Salaman had set up shop in New Plymouth, again with great success. But in August of that year another patient, six-year-old Lyall Christie, whom he was treating for diabetes, died in a coma. Salaman had only reluctantly agreed to treat the boy if his insulin was stopped. He was charged with manslaughter, convicted and sentenced to one year's hard labour, although the boy's mother did not hold him to blame. At his sentencing, Justice Michael Myers declared, "The prisoner is plainly a charlatan."

The people of New Plymouth, however, did not agree; they were outraged at the sentence. Nearly 500 attended a protest meeting. Many were convinced that the local medical profession had had a hand in Salaman's downfall. The government was petitioned for his immediate release.

After his prison term Salaman continued to practise in New Plymouth. When he died in 1941, more than 2000 people gathered at the cemetery. Salaman's grand Islamic tomb, which takes up 10 plots in Te Henui cemetery, is today a reminder of an exotic character and of the wealth that his fame as a herbalist had brought him.

Was Salaman a healer or a charlatan? The probability is that he was both. An analysis of his remedies at his first trial revealed

such commonplace substances as glycerine and ferrous sulphate (although the opium content was only a quarter of that often supplied by conventional doctors at the time). Salaman's standard method of diagnosis, placing a stethoscope on the patient's neck, seems to suggest either a cavalier attitude to anatomy or a little play-acting to instill faith in his medical expertise. That his treatment often worked is beyond doubt: his skill as a healer quickly spread by word of mouth.

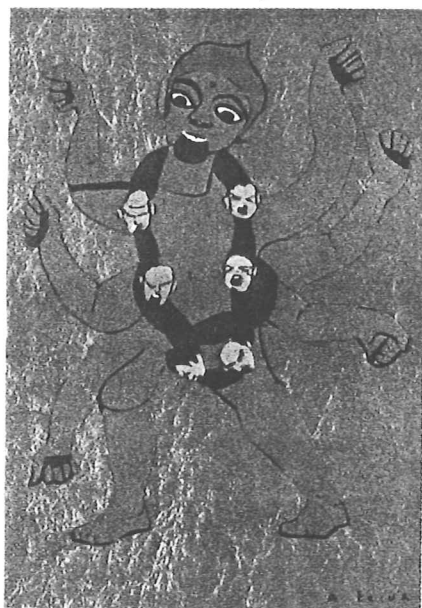
Salaman used one of the most powerful cures from ancient times: the placebo. Medical literature is full of reports of the power of the placebo to help patients with ailments of all sorts: headaches, bronchitis, arthritis, hypertension, asthma, sea sickness and many more. A placebo has been defined as a substance, device or procedure that brings improvement to the patient but has no intrinsic medicinal value. Psychotherapy is a placebo. Surgery can also be a placebo. For instance, patients with angina chest pain have shown considerable improvement from an operation that involved nothing more than a simple skin incision.

It's not a question of the gullible being more open to suggestion. Patients' personalities have little bearing on whether they show a placebo effect. Much depends on the patients' opinions of the prescribing doctor, their attitudes towards the treatment and their expectations. In one study, subjects swallowed a pill containing only a magnet to measure their stomach contractions. Their contractions increased or decreased depending on what they had been told to expect. In another experiment, people with asthma were given a placebo. Airway resistance increased or decreased according to what they had been told would happen on taking the placebo.

Amazingly, placebos, though in theory inert and harmless, have also been associated with side-effects such as nausea, sleepiness, depression, hallucinations, vomiting, diarrhoea, hives, rashes and so on.

Placebos are often dismissed as sham remedies by modern medicine, but there is a growing recognition of their importance in healing. There is a placebo factor at work in the treatment you receive from your GP, which is why the effects attributed to drugs vary from patient to patient and from doctor to doctor. An analysis, for instance, of 39 studies of 3252 depressed patients found that 50 percent of the drug effect was due to a placebo response. In 1995 the *Cancer Journal* described the placebo effect as "the healing force of nature".

That's not to say that placebos cannot be harmful. Placebo responses can "teach" chronic illness by reinforcing the delusion of chronic illness and make patients dependent on quacks who use placebo therapies. Salaman's placebos would have worked for good and ill. The many testimonials of his patients, however, suggest that he did more good than harm. ■



Capsules

Information please. I am researching the life of Walley Salaman. I would like to hear from relatives, friends, former patients,

or anyone who has information about this extraordinary character. Write to: 64 Rex Street, Miramar, Wellington, or email: ohare@xtra.co.nz

Pleasing medicine Placebo is

from the Latin "I shall please". The term was applied to the Vespers for the Dead, used to describe flatterers and toadies and laments sung at funerals by professional mourners. In 1785 it appeared in a

medical dictionary as "a commonplace method or medicine". In modern medicine it has come to mean a pharmacologically inert treatment provided to please patients rather than benefit them.