Placing placebo effects within the context of the doctor–patient relationship

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The doctor–patient relationship can be subdivided into four steps. The first is “feeling sick,” a key starting point that triggers the subsequent behavior. It involves sensory systems that generate conscious awareness, and indeed the perception of a symptom, like pain, is the product of bottom-up and top-down processes. The second step is “seeking relief,” a kind of motivated behavior which is aimed at suppressing discomfort. The third step is “meeting the therapist,” a special and unique social encounter whereby the therapist represents the means to suppress discomfort. Here many mechanisms are at work, such as the patient’s trust and hope and the therapist’s empathy and compassion. Finally, the fourth step is “receiving the therapy,” the final act of the doctor–patient interaction. The mere ritual of the therapeutic act may generate therapeutic responses (placebo responses) which sometimes may be as powerful as those generated by real medical treatments.