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Not so dummy

PLACEBOS cause measurable changes in the electrical activity of the brain, but only in patients who get some benefit from them. Psychiatrist Andrew Leuchter from the University of California, Los Angeles, and his team gave 51 patients with depression either antidepressants or capsules containing an inert powder. Within eight weeks, 52 per cent of the medicated patients recovered, as did 38 per cent of the placebo group ("American Journal of Psychiatry", vol 159, p 122). Patients helped by the placebo showed increased electrical activity in their prefrontal cortices - a brain area influenced by depression and by antidepressants. "The placebo effect is not just 'in their head'," says Leuchter, "it's in their brain."

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