PERCEPTIONS OF THE ETHICS OF PLACEBO AND ILLNESS: AN ANALYSIS OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL’S VIEWS OF MENTAL ILLNESS COMPARED TO PHYSICAL ILLNESS AND THE ETHICAL ROLE OF PLACEBO IN RESEARCH MEDICINE

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Psychotic disorders and other severe mental illness are complex pathological entities whose underlying pathology continues to elude complete biological explanation. This has led to mental illness being regarded with skepticism. Furthermore, modern medicine and bioethics have questioned the use of placebo as a treatment and its role in research medicine leading to controversy on the matter. While it is recognized that both have an impact upon healthcare professionals and the care that patients suffering from mental illness receive, there is a lack of both objective data and impact analysis of these views. This study examines the perceived differences between mental illness and physical illness, the ethics of using placebo to treat physical and mental illness, and the ethics of placebo use in clinical drug trials. This is evaluated by distributing questionnaires among healthcare professionals in area hospitals. The completed questionnaires are then analyzed to provide a baseline description of healthcare professionals’ views on placebo use in clinical investigational drug trials and to answer the two proposed hypotheses that follow. First, health professionals do perceive a difference between physical and mental illness; second, health professionals see an ethical difference between physical illness and mental illness.