

them down as instances of ‘the dangerous prevalence of imagination’, although imagination aroused not by solitude, as in *Rasselas*, but by a communal fever. Johnson may have been more right than he knew to remark on our attraction to stories of others like ourselves undergoing credible experiences. As the kindred phenomena of Mesmerism and Perkinsism suggest, one’s bodily experiences—one’s very sensations—may mirror those of others, or those imputed to others. Indeed, the predisposition to feel what we suppose others do remains to this day one of the channels of the placebo effect. In the tradition of Perkins, a book on the popular therapy known as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) may in fact preface the text with pages of testimonials, reminding the reader that EMDR is not just a method but a movement and inviting him or her to experience the moral electricity that animates it, to feel what others feel.¹¹ Clinical trials may tap the same principle. In a recent study of patients with irritable bowel syndrome, some participants were prescribed an inert medication openly described as ‘placebo pills, something like sugar pills’, but also said to have been ‘shown in rigorous clinical testing to produce significant mind-body self-healing processes’.¹² Invited in this way to experience a therapeutic effect that others were said to have enjoyed, a significantly higher percentage of the placebo group than the no-treatment group reported improvement. In encouraging patients to model the experience of their own bodies on the reported experiences of others, the designers of the

experiment, knowingly or not, followed a precedent now 200 years old.

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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Poem

What I wanted to hear

Routine ER page. He says it’s a COPDer.
 This will be easy—nebs, steroids, O₂. Home in a day.
 “What about the murmur?” I ask
 “No worries, it’s innocent.”
 Just what I wanted to hear.
 Admit to floor; return to bed.
 3 a.m. nurse is calling. Looks worse.
 “I can’t breathe.”
 Smell of fear. Lunge for my arm. Dead.
 Autopsy: pinpoint aortic stenosis.
 Fixable.

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Competing interests None.

Contributors MJG is the sole author of this poem.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

Published Online First 4 February 2011

J Med Ethics; Medical Humanities 2011;**37**:37. doi:10.1136/jmh.2010.006619