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Worse than Nothing

Cutting edge pharmaceuticals are improving our lives, and new inventions promise even more health for our futures. But **in many cases, help from drugs is worse than no help.**

In order for a prescription drug to be blessed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the drug only has to work better than nothing. Patients who take the new drug need to “get better” than patients who take a placebo – a sugar pill that has no active ingredients that would affect their health.

The question arises – **how much better than nothing should the drug work?** Redux, a weight loss drug, was approved when it showed that pill-takers lost on average six pounds more than placebo-takers. The drug also had side effects on patient’s lungs, which could be fatal. Stemming the epidemic of obesity took priority over these concerns, and the drug quickly became a big seller.

The lung side effect appeared in great numbers, once thousands of people started taking Redux. Plus, another unanticipated side effect on patient’s hearts appeared. Indeed, some facets of a drug are not known until a large population takes them. Studies to satisfy FDA requirements are as small as possible to reduce the manufacturers’ costs.

Within one year of its debut, Redux was taken off of the market. **Patients would have lost weight and been healthier if they had taken placebos.** Placebos were enough to inspire some weight loss, and caused no side effects.

Drugs that stay on the market are also cause for concern. They might work better than nothing, but **we often choose between drugs, not between a drug and nothing at all.** So, for example, Nexium (the “purple pill”) works better than nothing but it does not necessarily work better than its brother Prilosec. In fact, Nexium and Prilosec are nearly twins: the two are chemically different by one isomer. Yet Prilosec costs 80 percent less.

New drugs are cause for celebration if they truly do something new and remarkably better than current technology. Short of that, placebos start to look attractive. As Jerry Avorn, M.D. wrote in his book, *Powerful Medicines*, unless the drug truly works better

than a placebo, “. . . we could just prescribe the sugar pill. After all, it’s an affordable product with an enviable safety record.”

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