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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **PLACEBO A 'GAME CHANGER' IN CLINICAL PRACTICE**

From taboo beginnings in medical practice 200 years ago, the placebo effect may soon find its way into mainstream treatment of pain.

Associate Professor Damien Finniss, Chair of the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) group on Placebo, will present a keynote speech at the Australian Pain Society conference in Sydney in April.

He will tell the meeting that emerging research highlights the extent to which placebos can activate powerful mechanisms within the brain that can alleviate pain and some other conditions.

Professor Finniss, from the department of Anaesthesia and the Pain Management Research Institute, Royal North Shore Hospital Sydney, said: "The power of a placebo derives from the psychosocial context in which it is delivered – the 'therapeutic ritual' of a doctor-patient interaction."

"Powerful biological processes can take place during this ritual, provided the patient believes they will benefit from a treatment and trusts the clinician providing it. The biological effects are probably primed or triggered from the moment a patient seeks health care, and particularly in the early part of the health care encounter."

"To understand the power of this ritual, we can substitute a given treatment for a treatment simulation (a placebo). This causes the triggering of real psychobiological events."

"The critical conceptual challenge is that you don't always need to give a placebo to trigger placebo effects. These effects are triggered by many aspects of the health care encounter, of which a key component is the relationship between clinician and patient and the actual ritual of therapy."

"If we enhance this relationship and the many components of the interaction in addition to provision of current treatments, we may be able to augment our results and potentially reduce some of the dosing, cost and side effects of currently prescribed treatments," said Professor Finniss.

"Similarly, evidence shows that if we minimise the placebo component of a treatment (an analgesic drug for example), the drug becomes less effective. The placebo component is almost certainly working to augment the pharmacology of most of our drugs for the management of pain."

Even 'open label' placebos – where patients are fully aware they are taking a placebo – might have applications for clinical practice. In one recent trial patients were told they were taking a

placebo but this was coupled with education about the power of placebo effects, and the importance of self-management strategies.

“This ‘non-deceptive’ use of placebo may be an interesting avenue for future research and application to the bedside. It is a complete game changer as we now appreciate that some, if not the majority, of our patients may believe in the utility of placebo, when coupled with appropriate health care professional advice,” said Professor Finniss.

“Placebos traditionally had a bad image and were associated with deceit and non-treatment of patients. However, it might soon be considered unethical for medical practitioners not to harness placebo mechanisms that are a part of routine clinical care,” said Professor Finniss.

Other papers on placebo at the conference include:

- Dr Claire Ashton-James, Senior Lecturer at the Pain Management and Research Institute at the University of Sydney, will present new research into patients' perceptions of clinicians' moods, and the relationship between clinicians' job satisfaction and patients' treatment expectations. Her previous research looked at the role of patients' perceptions of surgeon warmth and competence on patients' experience of trust, pain, and distress.
- Dr Kate Faasse, Lecturer from the School of Psychology at the University of New South Wales and ARC Discovery Early Career Fellow, will present her research on how negative media coverage about specific medications can produce adverse physical outcomes in people taking those medications.
- Associate Professor Ben Colagiuri, from the School of Psychology at the University of Sydney, will discuss the opposite of placebo – nocebo – where a patient's medical condition is exacerbated by a negative psychosocial context. His most recent research looked at the role of fear in elevating pain.

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Australian Pain Society | [38th Annual Scientific Meeting](#) | 8-11 April 2018 | International Convention Centre Sydney

The Australian Pain Society (APS) is Australia's leading forum of university-trained health professionals (including GP and specialist doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, pharmacists, physiotherapists, psychologists and other allied health professionals and researchers) trained in the recognition, research, management and advocacy around all aspects of pain in Australia.