Title: In praise of ignorance

Abstract:

Ignorance, understood in its most basic sense as not knowing, is typically regarded as a deficit in a knowledge-driven society. In medicine, this view is reinforced by expectations that physicians embody epistemic authority, making it difficult for them to acknowledge ignorance. However, recent work in philosophy and science has called for a revaluation of ignorance, suggesting that openly admitting limits of knowledge may even sustain trust in expertise. This raises a tension in clinical contexts: acknowledging ignorance may undermine a patient's expectations about treatment efficacy, and thus weaken the placebo effect, understood here as an improvement in the patient's condition via expectation effects. This concern is particularly salient in psychiatry, where placebo responsiveness is high. Against this worry, however, I argue that placebo effects arise from a complex set of psychosocial factors, including the therapeutic context and the doctor–patient relationship. While a physician's perceived knowledge and authority contribute to expectation effects, other factors—such as honesty, empathy, and trust—also play a crucial role. Acknowledging ignorance may therefore have only limited negative impact and can be offset by strengthening these relational dimensions.