

Tainted Science: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

By Aryna. M Ryan

In 1932, one of the most deplorable experiments on human beings was undertaken, not in Nazi Germany, but in Tuskegee, Alabama. The U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) conducted a study to observe the natural course of untreated syphilis in 600 impoverished African-American sharecroppers in Macon County. Researchers believed that the effects of syphilis depended on race and that African-Americans' cardiovascular systems were more affected than their central nervous systems. Oddly, researchers also believed that African-Americans weren't interested in medical treatment.

Actually, the promise of treatment was why the sharecroppers cooperated. Of the 600 men, 399 already had latent syphilis; the control group of 201 were not infected. However, no one was told that syphilis was the focus of the study; they were told they had "bad blood." (Researchers counted on the fact that many of the men were illiterate.) Infected men never knew that they could infect others, go blind, deaf, develop heart disease, suffer bone deterioration, mental illness, or die. Plus the "health care" they received consisted of placebos, ineffective methods (including excruciating spinal taps), and useless diagnostic treatments.

To understand how much control the PHS had over their subjects' health, when 250 of the Tuskegee men registered for the draft in WWII and some were diagnosed with syphilis, the researchers prevented them from getting treatment. In 1947, penicillin was recognized as a cure for syphilis; however, the afflicted men were not given any. When health workers were advocating the eradication of venereal diseases in Macon County, the researchers kept the men from participating.

In 1966, Peter Buxtun, a social worker and epidemiologist at the PHS, wrote to the Division of Venereal Diseases expressing concern about the experiment. His letter was filed. Seven months after King's assassination, he wrote again, citing the study's political volatility. Still, the experiment continued. Finally, in 1972, Buxtun went to The Washington Star, and the next day, the story hit the New York Times front page. In November 1972, 40 years after it began, the Tuskegee experiment was finally halted.

At that point, only 74 of the original 600 had survived. Twenty-eight had died of syphilis, 100 died of related complications, 40 wives were infected, and 19 children were born with congenital syphilis.

The outrage over this scandalous experiment led to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services establishing the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP). In 1974, The National Research Act was passed, authorizing Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for all human experiments. IRBs require that participants must give informed consent, be provided diagnoses, and be given an accurate report of results.

On May 16, 1997, President Clinton apologized to the remaining members of the study for its racist design. Five of the eight survivors attended. One of them later sued the federal government and was awarded \$10 million.

By 1999, Tuskegee became home to the National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care, which was established "to explore issues that underlie research and medical care of African-Americans and other under-served people."

Regardless, long-term fallout from this infamous study led many African-Americans to distrust government-derived medical information. For example, although untrue, many believed that the PHS deliberately infected the Tuskegee men. In the 1980s, rumors circulated that HIV was developed to infect African-Americans. Many blacks fear donating bone marrow, and most recently, they were alleged to have immunity to COVID-19. Actually, their death rate has been 25%, though they are only 13% of the US population. Thus, the longest-running human experiment in the history of the US not only failed to come to any useful conclusion (due to poor design and inconsistent treatment), its repercussions still affect the well-being of many African-Americans.

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