

## The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

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The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment was a medical study conducted by the United States Health Service in 1932. The experiment began in Macon County, Alabama and its purpose was to assess the progression of untreated syphilis. The subjects of the trial consisted of 600 African American men who were at varying stages of the disease, these men were under the impression that the medical care they were receiving was legitimate and faithful, but in reality it was the opposite. This study went on for forty years and in that time, displayed key characteristics of medical racism; the unethical practice of medicinal experiments under the impression that certain races are superior to others simply by nature. Looking back upon this event, the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment can be deemed one of the most blatant examples of medical racism displayed in American history and continues to affect modern day America.

Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, the United States social climate was such that although African Americans were, by law, given equal rights, they still faced a great deal of discrimination. This racism could be seen throughout the entire country and was alarmingly prevalent in southern states who were notoriously, pro-slavery, and by the same token, anti-blacks. This was also a time of much needed medical advancements. The early 1900's was a time when syphilis became an increasingly common disease and doctors were unaware of how to stop its spread. As a result of the need for progression and the continuing racism, many of the medical experiments that were taking place, often proved to be examples of medical racism. Up until 1934, there was no known cure for syphilis, the closest possible solution was a combination of mercury and bismuth, two substances that although, had the potential to lessen the symptoms of syphilis, posed threats of their own.<sup>1</sup> The results of this mixture were far from consistent, only

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<sup>1</sup> "Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee."

working successfully thirty percent of the time. In the rare event that this medication was successful in treating the syphilis, it also yielded other side effects including the breakdown of ones nervous system, paralysis, blindness, and organ complications.<sup>2</sup> In order to prevent these consequences, scientists at the United States Public Health Service sought to analyze the disease without medication to eventually discover a reliable cure. When choosing the members of this study, doctors recruited poor African American men since it was considered that blacks were mentally and physically inferior to other races.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, justifying the torture and ultimate deaths that were a result of this experiment.

This experiment was conducted in Macon County, Alabama, a region of the United States which at the time was a part of the so- called “ Black Belt” due to its demographics and high population of African Americans, most of whom were former cotton slaves.<sup>4</sup> Although slavery had officially been abolished, that did not stop the racist southerners from discriminating against black in their everyday lives. The Plessy v. Ferguson supreme court case made strides to improve the treatment of African Americans in society but overall did not accomplish the goal of getting rid of this inequality. Instead, the Plessy v. Ferguson case along with the Gaines v. Canada case which demanded a school for African American children, upheld segregation on governmental level and led to the “separate but equal” ideas of society. These notions were based off of the compromise that blacks were still to be segregated from whites, but they were to be treated equally. Unfortunately, this concept was not completely successful, and African Americans in southern states continued to be disadvantaged when it came to social and political rights. Many

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Moore, “Medical Experimentation.”

<sup>4</sup> Darity, Tuskegee Syphilis Study.”

of the lower class African Americans living in Macon County worked on white-owned farms where the working conditions were so poor that the share croppers were compared to slave holders.<sup>5</sup> Considering that the majority of the population came from slave roots, most of the men in this area lacked an education, money, and rights. On the other hand, a small amount black men in Macon County were privileged enough to be considered “ middle class”, resulting in only a very small percentage of African Americans attending Tuskegee Institute.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, leaving most of the population poor and with limited opportunities. As a result of the social and economic status of the African Americans and the medical struggles they were facing due to the spread of syphilis, these African American men became a target to the scientists conducting the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

In the 1900’s, medical experimentation was becoming increasingly popular. The idea to use humans as living practice for doctors to perfect their work was introduced in the 18th century by supposed Nazi Germany who were known for participating in Race and Genetics experiments.<sup>7</sup> These experiments grew to become a world wide example of medical progression, unfortunately, disregarding the social progression that was also underway; a source explains the phenomenon by stating, “ As technology and medicine advanced at breakneck speed, at no time in history had there been such willingness to exploit human life for the benefit of scientific progress”.<sup>8</sup> The subjects of these experiments were typically slaves, heretics, and prisoners because they were not seen as important members of society. This was the mindset of doctors

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<sup>5</sup> ibid. 28

<sup>6</sup> ibid. 27

<sup>7</sup> Moore, Medical Experimentation.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

such as Thomas Parran Jr. who were involved in the study for its entirety.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the study was supposed to last for four months and its intent was to study the lasting effects of syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease, on black men. The study was proposed by Dr. Hugh S. Cummings, the head of the United States Public Health Service, in 1929. Cummings and other doctors noticed the prevalence of African Americans who suffered from syphilis but did not know why it was more prevalent in the black community. One assumption was that African Americans had a higher risk of contracting the sexually transmitted disease due to their “genetically higher sex drive and therefore contracted the disease more often”<sup>10</sup>. This theory was not supported, instead, the reason that so many African Americans had syphilis was due to their inability to pay for medical treatment. In an effort to help cure these men while also making new scientific discoveries, in 1932 the study was created. The study offered free medical care, burial insurance, and free meals to all participants as reimbursement for the knowledge they were helping the medical community to gain.<sup>11</sup> Over time, the charitable intent that the study once had was lost as it began to be tainted by the racist ideas of society.

The creation of this study is often credited to Taliaferro Clark, a doctor in the venereal disease section of the United States Public Health service, but there were many other doctors who were equally, if not more involved in its advancement. In 1932, when the study was first launched, Dr. Hugh S. Cummings was the head of the USPHS and generated the funding for the experiment. To Dr. Cummings knowledge, he was funding a beneficial cause that would help

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<sup>9</sup> "Survivor of '32 Syphilis Study Recalls a Diagnosis."

<sup>10</sup> "Correspondence Regarding the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment."

<sup>11</sup> "Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee."

diminish the prevalence of syphilis in underprivileged communities such as Macon County.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, there were multiple doctors working more closely on the project that knew of its corruption but continued to mislead Dr. Cummings along with the 600 African American men the study was being practiced on. These doctors include Dr. Oliver Wagner, who was the director of the USPHS Venereal Disease clinic. Dr. Wagner assisted in the continuation of the study following its initial deadline and was a strong advocate to continue the study despite not having the funds to provide medical supplies to its participants. Once the study had been prolonged, other doctors began to work with Dr. Wegner such as, Dr. Peter Buxton and Dr. Bill Jenkins.<sup>13</sup> Both acting as researchers who would eventually go on to expose and attempt to end the study. In the meantime, this group of doctors, led by Dr. Clark and Dr. Wegner sought out poor, African American citizens of Macon County, Alabama, who were both infected, and some who had not yet been exposed to the disease. Originally, the study was not race specific, meaning doctors could have also recruited white participants but Dr. Clark claimed it would make more sense to target African Americans; claiming that the, “the low intelligence of blacks meant that they would not seek treatment for syphilis. Observing, and not treating, was justified because these men would not choose to be treated anyway.”<sup>14</sup> Once deciding upon a targeted demographic, the doctors placed flyers around the area, advertising free medical care to those affected by “bad blood” and began to examine the volunteers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "The 1930s Government, Politics, and Law: Topics in the News.", 74-85

<sup>14</sup> Darity, "Tuskegee Syphilis Study."

<sup>15</sup> Brown, "'You've got bad blood': The horror of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

After the doctors met with the 600 patients hoping to be a part of the public health care study, the experiment officially began in 1932. The members of this study were obviously all African Americans, but with varying degrees of infection. Four hundred of the members had previously been infected by syphilis, and were all at different stages of its effects, and the remaining two hundred had not been exposed to the infection, but were suspected to contract it in the near future and already had other health concerns that they wish to be treated for.<sup>16</sup> As for the men that did test positive for the disease, they were never informed that they had syphilis, instead they were diagnosed with the broad term of “bad blood” so that the patients would not question the the doctors decision to not provide them with mercury and bismuth, the known treatment at the time.<sup>17</sup> Instead, doctors provided the patients with a false prescription, consisting of aspirin and tonic, in order to hide the reality that they were not actually being treated.<sup>18</sup> As the study went on, legitimate progress on finding the cure for syphilis took place and by 1947, penicillin was the standard treatment for syphilis and was highly effective. Unfortunately, Clark and the other doctors running this experiment were still curious as to what would happen to these men if they never received any treatment and withheld all medications from the 600 participants. Looking back on the unethical behavior of these certified doctors, historians studying this case have stated that, “ the fact that penicillin was purposefully withheld in order to encourage the disease to spread is one of the most shameful examples of racial medicine in U.S. history.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, at the time this study was taken place, racial biases were not only common, but

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<sup>16</sup> "Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee."

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Moore, Medical Experimentation.

<sup>19</sup> Yoon, "Families Emerge as Silent Victims Of Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment."

they were accepted by society, and therefore this study was able to continue for 40 more years, while using “human guinea pigs” who died and suffered tremendous side effects of a treatable disease.<sup>20</sup>

One may ask, how was this experiment prolonged for 40 years while being so corrupt? Why did the public not find out about it? The harsh reality was that the doctors practicing this study were so manipulative that they were able to maintain the facade that this “secret project” was still a charitable cause treating its underprivileged patients. One of the believers in this lie was the head of the USPHS, Dr. Hugh S. Cummings. Cummings and many other doctors at the USPHS knew that the study was going on but were unaware of the changes that had been made to it since its original proposal.<sup>21</sup> The doctors had also found a way to ensure the return of their patients after it had been ended the first time. Since the participants signed up for this trial under the conditions that it was only to last four months, doctors had to send out official letters to all of the families involved in the study to recruit them back. These documents deceived these patients for the second time by reiterating the mistruths that the study was going to cure their diseases. Once the members had promised to comply with the doctors for a longer period of time, the doctors conspired with outside sources to prevent private doctors and even the government from halting their experiment. Men in the experiment were required to sign a contract strictly prohibiting them from meeting with other doctors in order to avoid getting treated. At times, nurses in the study would even follow their patients home simply to make sure that they did not seek outside medical care.<sup>22</sup> In addition to stalking their participants, the doctors also alerted

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<sup>20</sup> "Profile: Thirtieth anniversary of uncovering of Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Brown, "'You've got bad blood': The horror of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

nearby clinics about their “secret experiment”, not disclosing any of the details of the experiment except a list of the participants, demanding that doctors other than themselves not provide any medical care to said participants.<sup>23</sup> On one reported occasion, an elderly member of the study disobeyed the rules and visited a local doctor where he was diagnosed with syphilis for the first time. Upon hearing what had happened, the leaders of the study, along with the County Medical Society and CDC attacked the doctor, claiming he ruined one of their subjects.<sup>24</sup> On a larger scale, Dr. Clark and Dr. Wegner had connections with the government that they used in order to secure their trial members. At the start of World War II, 250 men from the study were drafted to serve in the military. Aware that by being drafted into the military the men would have to receive actual medical care for their syphilis, the researchers told government officials about their plan, under the guise that it was still a charitable act, and got the 250 men exempt from the military and therefore prevented them from receiving penicillin.<sup>25</sup> In an apology written after the study was exposed, it is admitted that “ They [the doctors] forgot their pledge to heal and repair. They had the power to heal the survivors and all of the other and they did not.”<sup>26</sup>, this claim can be supported by the drastic lengths these doctors were willing to go to in order to prevent these 600 men from getting the treatment they needed.

With the strategic measures taken by the doctors performing the study, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment was able to continue until for forty more years until concerns began to be made public about its credibility. The first mention of the study in a negative manner was by Dr.

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<sup>23</sup> "Survivor of '32 Syphilis Study Recalls a Diagnosis."

<sup>24</sup> "Profile: Thirtieth anniversary of uncovering of Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

<sup>25</sup> "Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee."

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

Peter Buxton, one of the researchers on the project that decided he no longer wants to be associated with its racism and tried to end the study all together. Dr. Buxton met with a young press associate in 1966 but when the reporter mentioned the story to her boss he deemed it too controversial and did not allow her to publish it. The intel on the experiment was then sent to another press associate named Jean Heller. Heller was also advised by her boss not to publish the story, but she persevered and published the story in the Associated Press in 1969.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, the doctors once again used their manipulative powers and convinced the public not to trust this low- level reporter and the committee from the Centers for Disease Control allowed the study to be continued.<sup>28</sup> That was, until 1973, when the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare officially ended he study because it had been proven that the study was unethical and was not an appropriate practice of medicine.<sup>29</sup>As the study became increasingly known to the public more accusations were being made by members of the study. Civil rights Attorney, Fred Grey, filed a law suit against the United States Public Health Service and granted the participants \$10 million in settlement, a life time of free, legitimate health care, and free burial insurance.<sup>30</sup> This court case finally brought justice to the members of the study and exposed the truth of the experiment to the public.

Following the end of the study, in 1975, the Federal Government proposed a program that would provide medical care to the family members of the participants that contracted the disease. This program was utilized by 22 wives, 17 children, and 2 grandchildren of the original 600 men,

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<sup>27</sup>"Profile: Thirtieth anniversary of uncovering of Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

<sup>28</sup> "Survivor of '32 Syphilis Study Recalls a Diagnosis."

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Brown, "'You've got bad blood': The horror of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

but many other family members refused to join the program because they feared that it would simply be a repeat of the first government funded syphilis project.<sup>31</sup> Doctors were also unwilling to get involved in the programs because they feared that their reputations would be tarnished by working on medical programs related to the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. Thus, making almost all efforts to repair the damages done by the study seem insincere and ultimately ineffective. In a more genuine way, President Bill Clinton gave a formal speech to the surviving members of the study on May 16, 1997, at the White House. In this speech, President Clinton stated, “what the United States government did was shameful, and I am sorry ... To our African American citizens, I am sorry that your federal government orchestrated a study so clearly racist.”<sup>32</sup> admitting the failures of his own government and attempting to gain the forgiveness of those affected. The president understood that the nation had become divided because it broke the trust of African Americans who had seen people of their own be seen as worthless and be taken advantage of by the white man. With this empathy, President Bill Clinton was determined to gain back the trust of African Americans by ensuring them that an atrocity like the Tuskegee Syphilis study would never happen again.

Unfortunately, the efforts made by governmental programs and the president apology were not enough to make up for the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the effects of the injustice were still prevalent in the late 1900’s and can be seen in modern day America. Following the release of Jean Heller’s story regarding the study, survivors who were interviewed began to be openly ridiculed by members of their community. Charlie Pollard, a survivor who has spoken publicly

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<sup>31</sup> Yoon, "Families Emerge as Silent Victims Of Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment."

<sup>32</sup> "Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee."

about his experience stated, “this used to be a friendly town, now people cross the street to avoid shaking my hand.”<sup>33</sup> In a broader sense, the overall social climate then and now has been affected by the racism displayed in this experiment. At the time, very few African Americans trust the government after they let this racism stand for so long and as a result, refused to become involved in any government run programs such as the Participants Health Benefits Program even though it was intended to give aid to those affected. Even now, 45 years later African Americans are reluctant to participate in medical studies and statistically, there are far fewer organ donors that are African American than there are that are white. This lack of engagement can be attributed to the fear instilled in this population after they have seen men of their own kind be abused and disrespected by the government. This resentment is still seen in today's politics, in a response to President Clinton's apology for the study done in Tuskegee, a family member of one of the members who died in the study stated that, “Times haven't changed when it comes to blacks”, criticizing the government and claiming that it continues to display signs of racial bias.<sup>34</sup>

The United States has a clear history of slavery, discrimination, and racism and although it has recently improved, there is still an underlying issue regarding the treatment of African Americans in the United States of America. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study has shown itself to be a prime example of this ongoing racism, being compared to genocide and a “literal death sentence to many African Americans”, for its mistreatment of men in need of medical assistance.<sup>35</sup> As a result of this study, there are far fewer medical studies taking place in the

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<sup>33</sup> "Profile: Thirtieth anniversary of uncovering of Tuskegee syphilis experiment."

<sup>34</sup> Yoon, "Families Emerge as Silent Victims Of Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment."

<sup>35</sup> "Survivor of '32 Syphilis Study Recalls a Diagnosis."

United States and those that are still being conducted have any new laws regulating them so that the same manipulation that was used in the Tuskegee Study cannot be repeated.

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The Tuskegee experiment, or the "Tuskegee study of untreated syphilis in the Negro male," was a study funded by the federal government about the progression of syphilis among poor African American male residents in Alabama. The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) controlled the research, based at the Tuskegee Institute, an African American educational facility founded by Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), a respected African American community leader. The study began in 1932 and continued for four decades. In contemporary times, this experiment appears typically in research ethics textbooks as an exemplar of how not to proceed in scientific studies of people. Tuskegee is. It was originally called the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" (now referred to as the "USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee"). The study initially involved 600 Black men – 399 with syphilis, 201 who did not have the disease. Participants' informed consent was not collected. By 1943, penicillin was the treatment of choice for syphilis and becoming widely available, but the participants in the study were not offered treatment. In 1972, an Associated Press story external icon about the study was published. As a result, the Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs appointed an Ad Hoc Advisory Panel to review the study. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment [19] was a clinical study conducted between 1932 and 1972 in Tuskegee, Alabama, by the United States Public Health Service. Four hundred Afro-American sharecroppers, most of them illiterate, were studied to observe the natural progression of untreated syphilis up to their eventual death by the disease. This experiment aroused controversy and led to changes in the legal protection of the patients involved in clinical studies. Subjects involved in this experiment did not give their informed consent; they were not informed of their diagnosis and were told that they were being treated for "bad blood." The "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male," was conducted by the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) and involved blood tests, x-rays, spinal taps and autopsies of the subjects. The goal was to "observe the natural history of untreated syphilis" in black populations. But the subjects were unaware of this and were simply told they were receiving treatment for bad blood. To really understand the heinous nature of the Tuskegee Experiment requires some societal context, a lot of history, and a realization of just how many times government agencies were given a chance to stop this human experimentation but didn't. In 1865, the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution formally ended the enslavement of black Americans. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. Updated January 25, 2021 | Borgna Brunner. The United States government did something that was wrong?deeply, profoundly, morally wrong. It was an outrage to our commitment to integrity and equality for all our citizens. . . . clearly racist. ?President Clinton's apology for the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment to the eight remaining survivors, May 16, 1997. For forty years between 1932 and 1972, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) conducted an experiment on 399 black men in the late stages of syphilis. These men, for the most part illiterate sharecroppers from one of the poorest counties in Alabama, were never told what disease they were suffering from or of its seriousness.