Tuskegee Syphilis Study

Did doctors really let patients die without treating them?

By Megan Gilk

Syphilis Study

syphilis [sif-uh-lis]: a chronic infectious disease, caused by a spirochete, Treponema pallidum, usually venereal in origin but often congenital, and affecting almost any organ or tissue in the body, especially the genitals, skin, mucous membranes, aorta, brain, liver, bones, and nerves

The study of the natural history of syphilis began in 1932 in hope to treat black people. The study was called, "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male."

The study involved 600 black men, 399 with syphilis, and 201 without it. The researchers told them that they were being treated for "bad blood."



The Treatment

Actually, they were not being treated, but the black men didn't know it.

The study continued on for forty more

years. Penicillin, the drug choice for syphilis, came out in 1947. The researchers did not offer this treatment to the Negro men.

The researchers said that the men agreed to the study. However, they were not informed about what the study was.



Ad Hoc Advisory Panel

This panel found that the men had agreed to be examined and treated. There was no evidence of what the researchers had told them about the study.

They were never given correct treatment for their disease. The panel found that the men were never given the choice to quit the study.

The New York Times

Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years

By JEAN HELLER

WASHINGTON, July 25—For 40 years the United States Public Health Service has conducted a study in which human beings with syphilis, who were induced to serve as guinea pigs, have gone without medical treatment for the disease and a few have died of its late effects, even though an effective therapy was eventually discovered.

The study was conducted to determine from autopsies what the disease does to the human body

body.

Officials of the health service who initiated the experiment have long since retired.

Current officials, who say they

have serious doubts about the morality of the study, also say that it is too late to treat the syphilis in any surviving participants.

Doctors in the service say they are now rendering whatever other medical services they can give to the survivors while the study of the disease's effects continues.

Dr. Merlin K. Duval, Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare for Health and Scientific Affairs, expressed shock on learning of the study. He said that he was making an immediate investigation.

The experiment, called the Tuskegee Study, began in 1932 with about 600 black men.

New York Times article about the syphilis study.

Advisory Panel

- Concluded that the study was "ethically unjustified"
- October 1972 panel stopped the study and one month later,
 the end of the Tuskegee Study was announced
- In 1974, a \$10 million out-of-court settlement was reached promised to give all living participants of the study lifetime medical benefits and burial services
- Later on, wives, widows, and offspring were added. The last study participant died in January of 2004, and the last widow died in January 2009. There are currently fifteen offspring receiving the medical benefits.

Review of Major Points

- 1932 Study began including 322 with the disease and 201 without
- 1940 efforts made to delay men from receiving treatment
- 1945- Penicillin accepted as treatment choice for syphilis
- **1972** Study ends
- 1974 Tuskegee Health Benefit Program (THBP) was established to provide health benefits for participants of study, and families

Sources

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