Victims of 1940s Syphilis-Inoculation Experiment in Guatemala Fight for Compensation

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Between 1946 and 1948, the US Public Health Service (PHS) used 1,500 Guatemalans as human guinea pigs during an experiment in which they infected the Guatemalans with syphilis, gonorrhea, and chancroid without their prior consent. This is the spine-chilling finding published by historian Susan Reverby, from Wellesley College, in October 2010, a story that hit the headlines throughout the world.

Reverby revealed that Professor John Cutler (deceased), from the PHS’s Venereal Disease Research Laboratory (VDRL) inoculated Guatemalan prostitutes, prisoners, soldiers, and mental-health patients with sexually transmitted diseases, as part of a project funded by the Pan American Health Bureau (known today as the Pan American Health Organization, PAHO).

These experiments were carried out with the full knowledge of Juan Funes, director of the Ministerio de Salud’s venereal disease department, as well as Cutler’s superiors, R.C. Arnold and John F. Mahoney, of the VDRL in Staten Island, New York. The project’s findings, which were inconclusive, were not published.

The project aimed to determine under what circumstances penicillin could cure these diseases and how their progression could be stalled immediately after the patient had been exposed to them. The research team chose confined populations that were easily accessible: prisoners in a Guatemala City jail, patients of Guatemala’s single mental-health hospital, children from a national orphanage, and soldiers in the capital’s military barracks.

Cutler’s reports explain that prostitution had just been legalized in Guatemala and sex workers were regularly allowed to visit prisoners. With the collaboration of the Ministerio de Gobernación and the director of Guatemala City’s Sistema Peniciencario Central, prostitutes who had tested positive for syphilis or gonorrhea were allowed to have sexual intercourse with some 1,500 male prisoners.

In another experiment, prostitutes who had tested negative for these diseases were injected in the cervix with tissue extracted from human and animal syphilitic tumors, chancres, or pus from gonorreal sores before they had contact with the prisoners.

After the prisoners had been examined they were supposedly given doses of penicillin to cure the infection. However, the reports do not mention whether the prostitutes were ever treated.

Although the prisoners were unaware that they were being infected with deadly diseases, many started to oppose the fortnightly blood tests that they were subjected to. Another problem was that an exceedingly high number of false negatives made the blood tests inconclusive.

At this point, researchers turned their gaze to the 438 infants from the national orphanage, aged 6 to 16. In this case, the children were not infected with the disease. Instead, a series of tests were conducted that revealed that three children showed signs of hereditary syphilis (these infants were
given penicillin) and 89 others tested positive but did not display any symptoms of the disease. The research team then argued that it was necessary to use a specific type of blood test for this type of patient to eliminate any factors that could lead to confusing results.

Among the questions that these scientists sought to answer was whether penicillin could be used not only as a cure once the patient had contracted the disease but as a preventive treatment instead of the more aggressive substances commonly used at the time as the base ingredients for ointments that were directly applied to the genitals before intercourse. For this experiment, the subjects chosen were not prisoners but patients of Guatemala’s only mental-health hospital.

Since in this case prostitutes could not be used as a means of exposing patients to the disease, the researchers decided to directly inoculate them. The documents unearthed by Reverby show that initially many hospital staff members believed that the patients were being given yet another drug.

As payment for allowing patients to be used as human guinea pigs, the desperately underfunded hospital was given anti-convulsion drugs since many patients were epileptic, a refrigerator to store biological material, a film projector, and plates and cutlery. After being inoculated, each patient received a packet of cigarettes.

A few years after the study ended, the mental-health hospital suffered a serious fire, whose origin was never clearly determined, in which most patients and staff members died.

In another similar study, soldiers from local military barracks were inoculated. In 1948, Cutler received orders from his superiors to end the study as it had yielded no conclusive findings. The researchers packed their bags and left, and Cutler’s reports were filed and forgotten until Reverby accidentally stumbled upon them 64 years later.

**Victims fight for justice**

Following the publication of Reverby’s findings, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a public apology to Guatemala for the atrocities committed. "We are outraged that such reprehensible research could have occurred under the guise of public health. We deeply regret that it happened, and we apologize to all the individuals who were affected by such abhorrent research practices....The study is a sad reminder that adequate human subject safeguards did not exist a half-century ago."

In March this year, US lawyer Henry Saint Dhal announced that he had launched a collective lawsuit against the US on behalf of the victims in a Washington, DC, Federal Court.

Given that the experiments were carried out more than a half century ago among extremely vulnerable groups of people, it has been very difficult to trace the survivors’ whereabouts.

So far, 15 elderly men from the municipality of San Agustín Acasaguastlán, in the eastern department of El Progreso, who did their compulsory military service in Guatemala City during the 1940s, have come forward.

One of them is 85-year-old Manuel Gudiel García, who says that when he was posted to the military air base, US doctors forced him to receive weekly injections without ever explaining their purpose. After each inoculation he was bedbound for several days.
Saint Dahl’s Guatemalan counterparts also say they have contacted a man who recalls being used as a human guinea pig when he was a six-year-old boy growing up in an orphanage. Years later, he infected his wife with syphilis and their daughter was born with an incurable paralysis.

Saint Dahl explains that his legal team will seek justice for these victims based on the 1789 Alien Tort Statute, which has been previously used to compensate victims of human rights violations committed by the US in foreign countries, an old law which was originally meant to prosecute piracy in international waters.

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