

Tuskegee Experiment: The Infamous Syphilis Study

The Tuskegee experiment began in 1932, at a time when there was no known treatment for syphilis. After being recruited by the promise of free medical care, **600 men** originally were enrolled in the project.

The participants were primarily **sharecroppers**, and many had never before visited a doctor. Doctors from the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), which was running the study, informed the participants—**399 men with latent syphilis** and a **control group of 201 others who were free of the disease**—they were being treated for 'bad blood', a term commonly used in the area at the time to refer to a variety of ailments.

The men were monitored by health workers but **only given placebos** such as aspirin and mineral supplements, despite the fact penicillin became the recommended treatment for syphilis in 1947. PHS researchers convinced local physicians in Macon County **not to treat** the participants, and research was done at the Tuskegee Institute. (Now called Tuskegee University, the school was founded in 1881 with Booker T. Washington at its first teacher.)

In order to track the disease's full progression, researchers **provided no effective care** as the men died, went blind or insane or experienced other severe health problems due to their untreated syphilis.

In the mid-1960s, a PHS venereal disease investigator in San Francisco named Peter Buxton found out about the Tuskegee study and expressed his concerns to his superiors that it was **unethical**. In response, PHS officials formed a committee to review the study but ultimately **opted to continue it**, with the goal of **tracking the participants until all had died**, autopsies were performed and the project data could be analyzed.

As a result, Buxton **leaked the story** to a reporter friend, who passed it on to a fellow reporter, Jean Heller of the Associated Press. Heller broke the story in July 1972, prompting public outrage and forcing the study to shut down.

By that time, 28 participants had perished from syphilis, 100 more had passed away from related complications, at least 40 spouses had been diagnosed with it and the disease had been passed to 19 children at birth.

In 1973, Congress held hearings on the Tuskegee experiments, and the following year the study's surviving participants, along with the heirs of those who died, received a \$10 million out-of-court settlement. Additionally, new **guidelines** were issued to protect human subjects in U.S. government-funded research projects.

(In 1947, the Nuremberg Code was established in response to Nazi physicians forcibly performing gruesome experiments on prisoners in concentration camps during World War II. The document set forth basic ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects, such as the requirement that a person must give **informed consent** before participating in an experiment.)

As a result of the Tuskegee experiment, many African Americans developed a **lingering, deep mistrust of public health officials**. In part to foster racial healing, President Clinton issued a 1997 apology, stating, "The United States government did something that was wrong—deeply, profoundly, morally wrong... It is not only in remembering that shameful past that we can make amends and repair our nation, but it is in remembering that past that we can build a better present and a better future."

During his apology, the president announced plans for the establishment of Tuskegee University's National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care.

The final study participant passed away in 2004.

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. What is the population (n=) in the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment?
2. Describe the experimental group.
3. Describe the control group.
4. What is the independent variable (IV)?
5. What is the dependent variable (DV)?
6. Identify the ethical violation of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. (recall APA guidelines)
7. What type of experiment is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment?