

THE TUSKEGEE STUDY STORY (Continued)  
(Originally published July 1973)

The March *Bulletin's* version of the Tuskegee Study—based on facts from Dr. R.H. Kampmeier's excellent editorial on the subject, which appeared in the October 1972 issue of the *Southern Medical Journal*—managed to stir up a few small ripples around the country.

The article was reprinted in its entirety on March 27 by publisher W. E. Chilton III on the Op-Ed page of his *Charleston (W. Va.) Gazette* under the headline, "Southern Doctor Defends Black Syphilitic Study." It got from there to William Buckley's *National Review* where it elicited a paragraph of comment in the current news section. In April, syndicated columnist Jeffery Hart of *King Features*, devoting a full column, credited the *Muscogee Medical College Bulletin* (sic) with a welcome "demythologization" of the Tuskegee affair.

As a result of the Hart column, which appeared in many papers during April and May, we received letters and copies from readers in Colorado, Texas, Nebraska, Atlanta, Sarasota, Fla., Charleston (S.C.) and New Haven, Conn. The editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, unable to locate a Muscogee Medical College, wrote requesting a copy of the article and, facing the same problem, a Ms. Evelyn Rood of the Information Clearing House in New York City called long distance wanting a copy also. The article also reached Wes Gallagher, general manager of the *Associated Press* in New York, who found it "of great interest" and agreed to send it on to the Washington bureau and to the reporter who broke the story first.

But the creation of a myth is much easier than the undoing, particularly one so well established as that of Tuskegee. As the *National Review* indicated, such attempts are easily filed away in the no news category of Dog Bites Man. Dr. Kampmeter graciously wrote that he was pleased we took the opportunity to beat the drum a bit, observing, "It is pretty difficult, if not impossible, to beat down newspaper stories which go out over the press wires usually as 'headline' stories no matter how ill advised, inflammatory or downright dishonest."

Confirming the above opinions, in early May there was the news picture of Senator Ted Kennedy giving the annual Robert H. Kennedy Award For Reporting to Jean Heller, the reporter who originally broke the Tuskegee story. A few days later, the *Associated Press* carried a story that the Government, following suggestions of an investigating "Citizens Panel," had offered the participants still alive "free medical, health and dental care for the rest of their lives," including health appliances, drugs, transportation or "any other medical necessity." The offer was made not only to all the surviving syphilitics but also to some

two hundred more of the control group who never had the disease at all.

In late May, a lawyer representing the living syphilitics and non-syphilitics as well as the families of those deceased, appeared on national television stating his intention to secure by lawsuit adequate compensation for all his clients.

On May 29, the one hour, televised NBC Report on "Man, the Ultimate Experimental Animal" again devoted time to the Tuskegee "experiment" and Robert Rogers, as commentator, ended the program reflecting on the sad fate of the Tuskegee guinea pigs, while pointedly contemplating some untended headstones in a rural Alabama graveyard.

Another *Associated Press* release on June 13 reported that the nine-member, biracial, citizens panel, which spent eight months probing the Tuskegee Study, had found it "unjustifiable."

Locally, Roy Chipman, who has been looking after Martin Davis for years, was surprised to discover that Davis is one of these famous survivors. Davis, who is 68 now, has been retired on pension from one of the mills here and has remained in good health. Nevertheless, one of the HEW field agents assigned to tracing Tuskegee survivors visited Dr. Chipman last month and instructed him to bring Davis in for a complete medical work-up. The Government will authorize Chipman, who has never charged more than \$25.00 for a complete medical check in his life, a fee "not to exceed \$2500.00" for tests and examinations to make sure that Davis is still alive and well.

And so, the myth of the "brutal Tuskegee experiment" lives on and even gains momentum. Actually, the study began as a dull and uninspired bit of clinical research conceived more than forty years ago and duplicating a similar study conducted in Norway thirty years before that. The entire program was undertaken with an honest and admirable purpose and in an open manner. Its aim was to screen a rural population in an area of high syphilitic disease incidence, identify the afflicted and offer and give free treatment to those with acute and early syphilis. It did not choose to give treatment to another group of 399 males over 25 whose syphilis had already existed quiescently for 3 to 9 years; a) because the effect of drug therapy then available was of unproven value in such cases, and b) because of knowledge that treatment with such drugs interfered with the body's natural immunological mechanisms which kept syphilis inactive and often resulted in a disastrous and premature flare up of the disease. (This was particularly true with incomplete treatment, and experience had shown that it was extremely difficult to get more than 30% of such patients to come for injections at regular intervals for sixty or more required weeks.) By the time penicillin became available, the surviving ones had already demonstrated natural resistance and had had syphilis for nineteen to twenty-five years. Whether or not

penicillin can significantly alter the eventual outcome of such long standing syphilis is still a debatable question today.

It is well established today (partially as a result of such clinical studies as the Tuskegee one) that once untreated syphilitics have progressed more than two years into the latent, non-infectious stage, only 25% of them will develop late complications. The other 75% are home free. That some of the original untreated patients in the study are dead now more than 40 years later is not remarkable; probably one quarter of these died of complications related to late syphilis; most of them died from other causes incident to natural ageing.

So, perhaps the Tuskegee "experiment" needs to be remembered. First as an innocent, well-intentioned effort on the part of a concerned U.S. Public Health Service which was operating at the time with minimum funds in an era when "informed consent" was largely an unformulated concept. It needs remembering mostly as an example of distortion by irresponsible, superficial and sensationalist reporting, which converted it into a cause celebre with racial implications.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctor's Lounge", Julr 1973, Vol. XX No.7, p.15