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U.S. apologizes to Guatemalans for secret STD experiments

By Brett Michael Dykes

U.S. scientific researchers infected hundreds of Guatemalan mental patients with sexually transmitted diseases from 1946 to 1948 -- a practice that only came recently to light thanks to the work of an academic researcher. On Friday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius issued a formal apology to the Central American nation, and to Guatemalan residents of the United States.

"Although these events occurred more than 64 years ago, we are outraged that such reprehensible research could have occurred under the guise of public health," said Clinton and Sebelius in a joint statement. "We deeply regret that it happened, and we apologize to all the individuals who were affected by such abhorrent research practices."

The discovery of the long-ago experiments stems from another, far better known episode of federal tampering with test subjects to study sexually transmitted diseases: the long-running "Tuskegee experiment," studying 399 poor black men from Macon County, Ala., who had been diagnosed with syphilis but never informed of their condition. Federal scientists simply told the men they had "bad blood" and researchers compiled a four-decades-long study monitoring "untreated syphilis in the male Negro." Researchers never treated the illness over its usually fatal course, even after the simple remedy of penicillin was shown to be an effective syphilis treatment; participants received only free meals and medical exams, together with federal funding of their funeral expenses after they died.

The study began in 1932, continuing right through to 1972, when it was exposed in media reports.

One of the better-known experts on the Tuskegee scandal is Susan Reverby, a professor of women's and gender studies at Wellesley College who has published two books on the subject. As she was researching her most recent book, Reverby learned of the Guatemalan project, in which researchers from the U.S. Public Health Service conducted experiments on 696 male and female patients housed at Guatemala's National Mental Health Hospital. The scientists injected the patients with gonorrhea and syphilis -- and even encouraged many of them to pass the disease on to others.

"It was done in conjunction with the Guatemalan government," Reverby told The Upshot in a phone interview Friday morning. "They had permission from the Guatemalan government."

Reverby explained that she learned of the Guatemala study purely by accident.

"I was in the archives of the University of Pittsburgh looking at the papers of the surgeon general at the time," Reverby said. "And the papers there were also the papers of a man named John Cutler, who had also been involved in the Tuskegee study. When I opened the boxes of the Cutler papers, there was nothing in it about Tuskegee, but there was everything about this Guatemala study."

Reverby -- who was instrumental in getting former President Bill Clinton to offer an apology for the Tuskegee experiment in 1997 -- told us that she informed Dr. David Sencer, the former head of the Centers for Disease Control; Sencer then passed the discovery up the chain of command in the U.S. government.

"As with many of these things, it was just pure serendipity," Reverby said. "I was the right person in the right place at the right time."