
SUSAN M. REVERBY, PHD

Author of “Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and its Legacy”

Susan M. Reverby is an historian and the Marion Butler McLean Professor in the History of Ideas and Professor Women’s and Gender Studies at Wellesley College. She is living proof you can get an undergraduate degree in the “wrong” field for yourself (Industrial and Labor Relations B.S. from Cornell) and still be in the humanities by getting an M.A. and PhD in American Studies. Her work has focused on women’s labor history, the history of nursing, race in medicine and public health, and ethics. Her latest book, which won three major awards, is *Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and its Legacy*.



A N HISTORIAN WALKS INTO AN ARCHIVE...

It was supposed to be an ordinary day in the University of Pittsburgh’s archives in an industrial section of that city. I did not really need to be there, just following up another scholar’s footnotes on the kinds of studies on syphilis that were done in the 1920s. I was working on a second book about the infamous and well-known study in Tuskegee, where nearly 600 African American men (2/3 who already had late stage syphilis, 1/3 without the disease) were not treated but watched by the U.S. Public Health Service for four decades between 1932 and 1972. I did not find what I was looking for.

What I discovered instead was evidence of a then mostly unknown study, this one done in Guatemala in 1946-48, where sex workers, soldiers, mental patients and prisoners were actually *infected* with syphilis, gonorrhea and chancroid, but not told they were in an experiment nor properly treated. The study, run by an American physician who a decade later would also work in Tuskegee, was kept hidden away because it violated ethical norms at the time, even as the United States was prosecuting Nazi doctors in Nuremberg. There were thousands of pages of lab notes, hundreds of photographs, and multiple notebooks of correspondence. I took lots of notes. Then I did nothing for another few years as I finished my Tuskegee book, expecting this to be but a chapter.

It never made it into the book. It did make it into conversations with others, including David Sencer, the former director of the Centers for Disease Control who had been the CDC chief during the end of the Tuskegee Study. He read the paper I finally wrote up for me and asked if he could share it with CDC higher ups. The next few months were a whirlwind: a CDC epidemiologist went to Pittsburgh to look at the records, my paper and his report went up the chain of command, then to the National Institutes of Health, and finally to the White House and the State Department. On October 1, 2010, there was a formal federal apology to Guatemala from the Secretaries of State and Health and Human Services, a phone call from President Obama to the President of Guatemala, news coverage that spanned the world, and eventually reports from bioethics commissions in the U.S. and Guatemala

What I learned is you can never imagine what you will find in the archives. You can never know how the material will be used. You can never be sure how a story of medical misfeasance of this magnitude might lead to apologies, and hopefully more awareness of the arrogance of medical researchers who think they have the right to use whomever they need in the search of “truth.” And you never can predict how a simple walk into the archives can change your own understandings of how we need to oversee what happens in the name of research.