

News

Tuskegee

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many blacks had never even seen a doctor. The men were tested and sorted into groups — 399 with syphilis and another 201 who were not infected.

The disease-free men were used as a control group. Health workers told syphilitic fathers, grandfathers, sons, brothers and uncles only that they had “bad blood.”

None of the men was asked to consent to take part in a medical study. They also weren't told that “bad blood” actually was a euphemism for syphilis. Instead, doctors purposely hid the study's purpose from the men, subjecting them during the study's early months to painful spinal taps and blood tests.

Medical workers periodically provided men with pills and tonic that made them believe they were being treated, but they weren't. And doctors never provided them with penicillin after it became the standard treatment for syphilis in the mid-1940s.

The government published occasional reports on the study, including findings which showed the men with syphilis were dying at a faster rate than the uninfected. But it's doubtful any of the men — or their wives, girlfriends or other sex-



Tabitha Julkes lights a candle during a ceremony near Tuskegee, Ala., on Monday, April 3, 2017, to commemorate the roughly 600 men who were subjects in the Tuskegee syphilis study. Julkes' great-grandfather Albert Julkes was a test subject, and she is among the descendants of men who are now stepping forward publicly to tell their stories.

ual partners — had any idea what had happened until an Associated Press story was published nationwide on July 26, 1972.

The next morning, farmer and community leader Charlie Pollard walked into Fred Gray's law office in Tuskegee. Gray already was a civil rights legend by that point: His clients included Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks following her arrest in Montgomery in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man.

Pollard “came into my office and asked me if I had been reading in the

newspaper about the men who were involved in the syphilis tests for “bad blood,” Gray wrote in a memoir.

Pollard was among the men in the study, and his visit with Gray led to the lawsuit and the multimillion-dollar settlement reached with the government on Aug. 28, 1975. In all, Gray said in an interview, government documents showed 623 men were involved in the study.

Payments to men and their heirs differed based on whether men were infected or were in the control group, whether

they were dead or alive. Living participants who had syphilis got \$37,500; heirs of deceased members of the control group received \$5,000. Women and children who were infected with syphilis got lifetime medical and health benefits, and a handful still survive, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For decades, the study has been widely blamed for distrust among U.S. blacks toward the medical community, particularly clinical trials and other tests. In medical and public health circles, it's known as the “Tuskegee effect.”

Freddie Lee Tyson quit the study during the 1950s after hearing rumblings that “something was wrong,” Lille Head said.

Unaffected by the disease despite years of being in the study's syphilitic group, Tyson learned the true nature of the program only when the rest of the country found out, his daughter said. His wife and children all tested negative for syphilis, but Tyson was traumatized and feared the disease would show up somewhere in his family.

“After he found out about it he had to live with it. That could bring a person down if he wasn't strong. He was angry and he was upset,” she said.


The lawsuit settled years before, Tyson died in 1988 at age 82 after an automobile accident. Today, the 72-year-old Head chairs Voices of our Fathers Legacy Foundation, a nonprofit organization formed in 2014 by the men's relatives to tell the story of the victims of the Tuskegee study.

Through the decades, their loved ones have


been portrayed both as unwitting victims of a horrid experiment and as ignorant hicks who brought trouble on themselves with promiscuous behavior. Many descendants are still steamed over a 1997 movie called “Miss Evers Boys,” which they believe cast the men in a bad light. A big part of the foundation's purpose is rounding out the narrative of the men's lives by telling the story of people like Freddie Lee Tyson, Head said.

Descendants of the men began gathering a year or two after Clinton hosted five remaining test survivors in the White House. The meetings are held in conjunction with Tuskegee's National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care, established in 1999 to address ethical and human rights issues in science, particularly concerning minorities.

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All information is current as of May 1, 2017

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