

# The racist Tuskegee syphilis experiment was exposed 50 years ago

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In the fall of 1932, the fliers began appearing around Macon County, Ala., promising “colored people” special treatment for “bad blood.”

“Free Blood Test; Free Treatment, By County Health Department and Government Doctors,” the black-and-white signs said. “YOU MAY FEEL WELL AND STILL HAVE BAD BLOOD. COME AND BRING ALL YOUR FAMILY.”

Hundreds of men — all Black and many of them poor — signed up. Some of the men thought they were being treated for rheumatism or bad stomachs. They were promised free meals, free physicals and free burial insurance.

What the signs never told them was they would become part of the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male,” a secret experiment conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service to study the progression of the deadly venereal disease — without treatment.

On July 26, 1972 — 50 years ago Tuesday — much of the public learned of the gruesome Tuskegee experiment when the New York Times ran an [Associated Press story](#) on its front page revealing that the men had deliberately been left untreated for 40 years. The revelation led to the end of the study, congressional hearings and a class-action lawsuit.

The study recruited 600 Black men, of whom 399 were diagnosed with syphilis and 201 were a control group without the disease. The researchers never obtained informed consent from the men and never told the men with syphilis that they were not being treated but were simply being watched until they died and their bodies were examined for ravages of the disease.

Charles Pollard, one of the last survivors, recalled that he heard that men were receiving free physicals at a local one-room schoolhouse, according to James H. Jones’s book [“Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment.”](#)

“So I went over, and they told me I had bad blood,” Pollard remembered. “And that’s what they’ve been telling me ever since. They come around from time to time and check me over and they say, ‘Charlie, you’ve got bad blood.’ ”

In the book, Herman Shaw, a farmer, recounted hearing about the study as a kind of health-care program. “People said you could get free medicine for yourself and things of that kind, and they would have a meeting at Salmon Chapel at a certain date.” So he went.

When the study began, treatment for syphilis was not effective; it was often dangerous and fatal. But even after penicillin was discovered and used as a treatment for the disease, the men in the Tuskegee study were not offered the antibiotic.

“All I knew was that they just kept saying I had the bad blood — they never mentioned syphilis to me. Not even once,” said Pollard, who added: “They been doctoring me off and on ever since then. And they gave me a blood tonic.”

Shaw explained: “We got three different types of medicine. A little round pill — sometime a capsule — sometime a little vial of medicine — everybody got the same thing.”

Although originally projected to last six months, the study extended for 40 years. “Local physicians asked to assist with study and not to treat men,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in a timeline of the experiment. “Decision was made to follow the men until death.”

Eunice Rivers, a local nurse, was brought on by doctors to serve as a recruiter and conduit between researchers and the men. Nurse Rivers, as she became known, kept records of the men and drove them to government doctors when they visited the community. She took them to doctor’s appointments in “a shiny station wagon with the government emblem on the front door,” according to “Bad Blood.” On one occasion, she followed a man to a private doctor to make sure he did not receive treatment.

In 1945, according to the CDC timeline, penicillin was “accepted as treatment of choice for syphilis.” The U.S. Public Health Service created what they called “rapid treatment centers” to help men afflicted with syphilis — except the men in the Tuskegee study.

In 1966, Peter Buxtun, a public-health service investigator, raised concerns about the study. He wrote to the director of the U.S. division of venereal diseases about the ethics of the experiment. But the agency ignored Buxtun’s concerns.

Buxtun eventually leaked information about the study to an AP reporter named Jean Heller, who years later called it “one of the grossest violations of human rights I can imagine.” On July 26, 1972, [Heller’s story about the experiment](#) appeared on the front page of the New York Times.

The study was finally brought to a halt, and the following year, a congressional subcommittee held hearings on the Tuskegee experiment.

In 1973, a class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of the men in the study by Fred Gray, the civil rights lawyer who had represented Rosa Parks. Pollard was among those he represented.

A \$10 million out-of-court settlement was reached in the case. “The U.S. government promised to give lifetime medical benefits and burial services to all living participants,” the CDC reported.

In 1974, Congress passed the National Research Act, which was aimed at preventing the exploitation of human subjects by researchers.

On May 16, 1997, President Bill Clinton issued an apology to the eight remaining survivors of the experiment.

“The United States government did something that was wrong — deeply, profoundly, morally wrong,” Clinton said. “It was an outrage to our commitment to integrity and equality for all our citizens. To the survivors, to the wives and family members, the children and the grandchildren, I say what you know: No power on earth can give you back the lives lost, the pain suffered, the years of internal torment and anguish. What was done cannot be undone. But we can end the silence. We can stop turning our heads away. We can look at you in the eye and finally say on behalf of the American people, what the United States government did was shameful, and I am sorry.”

On July 7, Gray, the lawyer who filed the class-action suit, was among 17 people given the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Biden.

“When I filed the various civil rights cases from 1955 to date, I was concerned about African Americans receiving the same constitutional rights as all other Americans,” Gray said in a [statement](#). “We have made substantial progress but the struggle for the elimination of racism and for equal justice continues. I hope this award will encourage other Americans to do what they can to complete the task so that all American citizens will be treated the same, equally and fairly, in accordance with the Constitution.”

*A version of this story originally ran on May 16, 2017.*

## CLARIFICATION

This story has been updated to clarify that the story that ran on the front page of the New York Times was written by an Associated Press reporter.