

Catholics condemn 1940s experiments on Guatemalans as abuse of power

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic - Catholic leaders condemned the Tuskegee-like medical experiments U.S. researchers carried out on Guatemalans in the 1940s, calling them a “deplorable” abuse of power.

“We fundamentally reject this and other abuses the United States has committed against the Guatemalan people in the past,” said Father Mauro Verzeletti, secretary of the Guatemalan bishops’ pastoral committee on human migration. “This was medical terrorism.”

From 1946 to 1948, American researchers infected 696 Guatemalans with the sexually transmitted diseases syphilis and, in fewer cases, gonorrhea. The patients were then treated with penicillin, a relatively new medicine at the time. The study was aimed at testing the drug’s effectiveness in fighting those diseases, but the participants did not know they were part of a trial.

The unpublished study was discovered by Wellesley College medical historian Susan M. Reverby while sifting through archives at the University of Pittsburgh. Reverby, whose article on the experiments will be published in January’s *Journal of Policy History*, gave U.S. health officials an advanced copy of her findings.

On Oct. 1, the United States formally apologized to Guatemala.

“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 a joint statement issued by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius. “We deeply regret that it happened.”

U.S. President Barack Obama later called Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom to apologize.

Although the Guatemalan government signed off on the experiments, Colom said his administration had no knowledge of the studies.

“This is a gross violation of human rights,” he told the BBC. “These are ethical violations. ... In my opinion, this is a crime against humanity.”

The inhumane way in which the experiments were carried out shocked Guatemalans as much as the secrecy of the study itself. In some cases, the researchers, with the backing of the National Institutes of Health and a predecessor to the Pan American Health Organization, paid prostitutes carrying syphilis to have intercourse with prisoners. If that did not work, bacteria were directly introduced to scrapes made on prisoners’ bodies.

Other populations targeted included patients in Guatemala City’s only mental hospital, soldiers in a downtown barracks and prostitutes. Those who did contract the diseases were treated with penicillin, but it is not clear how effective the treatment was, Reverby wrote in her paper. At least one person died.

“Guatemalans were treated as lab rats in these experiments,” Nery Rodenas, executive director of the Archbishop’s Human Rights Office in Guatemala City, told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview. Researchers “clearly chose the most vulnerable populations, those who couldn’t object. And they deceived them as to what they were doing.”

Rodenas joined Father Verzeletti and other Guatemalan leaders in calling for reparations from the U.S. government for the few victims still living and the families of those who have since died.

We “believe that the government has to do something to compensate these victims for these immoral acts,” Father Verzeletti told CNS in a phone interview.

Newly named Guatemala City Archbishop Oscar Vian Morales has not publicly commented on the situation and did not return CNS phone calls.

Whether the revelations will harm relations between the two countries remains to be seen. The Pan American Health Organization and National Institutes of Health both expressed regret for their participation.

But anger among the Guatemalan public was obvious. An op-ed in the country's largest newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, called it a "total disrespect for human dignity, similar to the atrocious actions of Nazi doctors."

Dr. Carolina de Magallanes, executive secretary of the Guatemalan bishops' health commission, said the conference would release a statement in mid-October about the revelations.

"All of us are extremely troubled by what happened and that we are only now learning about it," she said. "I would say that at this point we are all indignant."

While not addressing the issue of reparations directly, Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, told reporters Oct. 1 that the U.S. and Guatemalan governments would launch a joint fact-finding investigation into the experiments. Separately, the U.S. Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues will review how U.S.-funded studies are carried out internationally, Collins said.

The commission will "look more broadly across the world at the way in which human subjects research is overseen to ensure that the highest rigorous ethical standards are now being maintained and that researchers are being appropriately trained," Collins said.

Few of the modern ethical safeguards on such studies were in place 60 years ago, and that led to numerous abuses, said Dr. Stephen Napier, ethicist with the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia.

"This experiment (in Guatemala) is part of a trend of grave violations of human dignity that took place," Napier said. "Human beings were treated not as human being, but merely as means to an end."

The doctor who oversaw the experiments in Guatemala, Dr. John Cutler, was also involved in the infamous Tuskegee experiment. The Tuskegee experiment, which ran from 1932 to 1972, recruited 399 black Alabama men who had syphilis to study how the disease progressed. The men were not told they had syphilis and they were never treated for it. Cutler, who dedicated his career to research in sexually

transmitted diseases, defended his role in the Tuskegee work in a documentary filmed in the years before his 2003 death.

The Tuskegee experiment is perhaps the most recognized in a long list of unethical experiments carried out in the name of science's greater good.

"There was so much stuff that happened from the 1940s onward where the scientific goal was carried out with impunity," Napier said. "The scientific research culture was vicious."