

"Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present"

Harriet A. Washington, 2006, 501 pages, Harlem Moon, \$15.95

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

"Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present" is a comprehensive history of medical and related abuses of African Americans. In some episodes, the exploitation is not specifically of African Americans, but more generally of the socially and economically disadvantaged. However, black victims may not take much comfort from this distinction.

When a clinical researcher sets out on a course of experimentation, he or she must weigh the costs and benefits. The result of this calculation is predictable when the researcher places no value on the cost to the study subjects. The culture of slavery relies on the belief that the slaves are inferior beings, so it is no surprise that medical doctors cheaply traded the welfare of black subjects for the possibility of medical progress. The cultural impact of slavery did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation – The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male ran from 1932 until 1973.

Antebellum medical schools competed for students by advertising their access to African American patients. For example, the Savannah Medical College boasted that its black patients provided "abundant clinical opportunities for the studying of disease." Surgery at the Medical College of South Carolina was performed only on blacks.

In 1860, African Americans represented 40% of the South's population, but a much lower percentage in the clinic. Nevertheless, half of the articles in the 1836 Southern Medical and Surgical Journal dealt with experiments performed on African Americans. Beginning in 1830, Dr. Francois Marie Prevost performed 30 of 37 experimental cesarean sections on slaves. In 1852, Dr. Marion Sims, the "father of gynecology," reported in the Journal of the American Medical Sciences that on his thirtieth attempt with slave women – probably without their informed consent and perhaps without their consent at all – he successfully repaired a vesicovaginal fistula (without anesthesia). Mr. Sims' choice of subjects was understandable given their availability, controllability and freedom for exploitation.

The exploitation of African Americans in clinical research may be behind us, but the ethical challenge survives in the African countries from which the original slaves were recruited.

The book consists of 15 chapters:

- Southern Discomfort: Medical Exploitation on the Plantation
- Profitable Wonders: Antebellum Medical Experimentation with Slaves and Freedmen
- Circus Africanus: The Popular Display of Black Bodies
- The Surgical Theater: Black Bodies in the Antebellum Clinic
- The Restless Dead: Anatomical Dissection and Display
- Diagnosis: Freedom: The Civil War, Emancipation, and Fin de Siecle Medical Research
- "A Notorious Syphilis-Soaked Race": What Really Happened at Tuskegee?
- The Black Stork: The Eugenic Experiments on African Americans
- Caged Subjects: Research on Black Prisoners

- The Children's Crusade: Research Targets Young African Americans
- Genetic Perdition: The Rise of Molecular Bias
- Inspection and Inequity: Illness as Crime
- The Machine Age: African American Martyrs to Surgical Technology
- Aberrant Wars: American Bioterrorism Targets Blacks

The book is available in bookstores.

Reviewer

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