

"The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: The Real Story and Beyond"

Fred D. Gray, 1998, 175 pages, NewSouth Books, \$16.00

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

"The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: The Real Story and Beyond" provides a first-hand, mostly objective account by the attorney who successfully sued the U.S. government on behalf of the study subjects and their families.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study was one of the best-kept open secrets in the United States. Fred Gray, the author, was born and reared in a neighboring county, opened a law office in Tuskegee in 1958 (with a major civil rights practice), lived in Tuskegee starting in 1965, served in the state legislature, and even he had never heard of the study until he read about it in a newspaper in 1972.

The book presents offers some remarkable details about the study:

- The U.S. Public Health Service conducted the study in Tuskegee because of the very high rate of syphilis in Macon County (40% of black men examined in 1930), the availability of modern medical facilities at the Tuskegee Institute, and the black, impoverished, poorly educated, non-mobile, untreated and tractable local population.
- The scientists believed that syphilis attacked blacks differently than whites (a relatively high proportion of cardiovascular vs. neurological damage), a justification that somewhat diminished the inherent racism of the study.
- The original study design included treatment after eight to 10 months of observation, but only an inadequate, short course with the largely ineffective medications available at the time.
- Based on data from the study, researchers concluded that untreated syphilis doubled the death rate (from 20% to 40%) of men aged 25 to 50. However, epidemiological data from the study was statistically unsound.
- Racism was so prevalent in Alabama that, in 1958, George Wallace lost the election for governor because he was too *moderate*.
- In 1966, Peter Buxton, a venereal disease researcher at the time, first wrote a letter to the chief of the PHS Venereal Disease Division questioning the study. Six years later, in 1972, he contacted Jean Heller, an AP reporter, who wrote the newspaper story exposing the study later that year.
- Fred Gray financed the lawsuit with a loan from a local bank. James Allen Parker, president of the bank, was the first white person to receive the National Bar Association's Gertrude Rush award, for his contributions to civil rights.

The book includes 12 chapters:

- Introduction
- Macon County, Alabama
- Origins of the Study
- The Study, 1932-1972
- The Study Revealed
- The Lawsuit
- An Abrupt End to the Study

- Aftermath
- The Presidential Apology
- The Legacy
- Beyond Tuskegee
- Epilogue

The book is available at bookstores.

Reviewer

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