U.S. apologizes for Syphilis Research in Guatemala

On 1st October 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius apologized to the government of Guatemala and the survivors and descendents of affected human subjects in a National Institutes of Health (NIH) sponsored research in Guatemala. They called the experiments “clearly unethical” - “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. We deeply regret that it happened, and we apologize to all the individuals who were affected by such abhorrent research practices.”

From 1946 to 1948, American public health doctors, led by Dr John C. Culter through the NIH deliberately infected nearly 700 Guatemalan prison inmates, mental patients and soldiers with venereal diseases in order to test the effectiveness of penicillin. Paid syphilis infected prostitutes, bacteria poured onto scrapes made on their penis, faces or arms and spinal puncture were some of the ways the men were infected, without their informed consent. Dr Culter’s unpublished Guatemala work was unearthed in the archives of the University of Pittsburgh by Professor Reverby, a medical historian. Her findings were made known to Dr David J. Sencer, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control who prodded the U.S. government to investigate.

President Alvaro Colom of Guatemala who first learned of these experiments from Mrs Clinton called them “crimes against humanity”. He thanked the U.S. for its transparency in telling them the facts. His government would cooperate with the American investigation and do its own.

Please contact the IRB Secretariat at 6516 4311 or 6516 7359 or email at irb@nus.edu.sg if you require further assistance or information.

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