



HeadStuff.

Tuskegee syphilis experiment^{1 2}

Our Sexual History

Host: Shawna Scott

Posted on January 27, 2017

SHAWNA SCOTT:

Hey guys. We've got some bonus history for ye today. Sometimes when we're recording the podcast, eh, we end up recording for way longer than we're meant to. And it's the case with this episode that we were recording for an hour and a half and Ciaran was telling me this incredible story that we just couldn't quite fit into the original podcast, so we're going to share it with you now. And we hope that you enjoy it.

CIARAN CONLIFFE:

The U.S. and syphilis. The U.S. is actually responsible for two of the most infamous incidents in the history of syphilis.

SHAWNA:

Yes, because when I asked you to come on the show you're like, "I have, like, a twentieth century, like, syphilis story for you..."

CIARAN:

Yes.

SHAWNA:

"...and like, you guys are to blame for it."

CIARAN:

Yeah. So, and this is...

¹ Available at <https://www.headstuff.org/our-sexual-history/episode-4-bonus-short-history-syphilis/>.

² Content warning: extreme racism and racial trauma. I assign this because it's an easy way to learn about the Tuskegee syphilis study. The host and guest are duly horrified but still uncomfortably light-hearted. You may find it easier to read rather than listen.

SHAWNA:

So what did we do that was terrible?

CIARAN:

This is actually something that's surprisingly relevant today because it still affects a lot of people's attitudes. And in fact it's—it's one of the things that people involved in, uh—if you ask someone in the American Black community, like, "Why don't you trust the establishment?" This is something they'll cite. They'll all talk about Tuskegee.

SHAWNA:

Okay. So tell us about Tuskegee.

CIARAN:

So, Tuskegee is a small town in Alabama, uh, with a university.³

SHAWNA:

Okay.

CIARAN:

And in 1932 the University recruited six hundred poor, Black labourers for a medical study. Because they wanted to study the long-term effects of syphilis. And they tested the six hundred men and four hundred⁴ of them did have syphilis. And their plan was, "We'll study them for six months, then give them the best treatment available. And, uh, and study how that affects them." But it did start to go wrong almost straightaway because the guy who came up with the study,⁵ he wanted to be completely open about it, and the University went, "No, if we tell them they have syphilis they'll just all go and get treated straightaway." So they lied to them and didn't tell them.

SHAWNA:

...So they just said—so what—I don't—understand, like, "Okay, we're going to study you even though you don't have a disease?" Like, what—what was their line for that?

³ Tuskegee University, a historically Black College

⁴ More precisely, 399 men participated in the study. As compensation they were offered free medical care (incomplete care, obviously), burial insurance, and free meals when they visited the University for the study.

⁵ Dr. Taliaferro Clark

CIARAN:

They—fed them—they came—their main cover story was that they were just studying the general health of the community.

SHAWNA:

Okay...

CIARAN:

And they said, like, these guys, you're helping us find the diseases that are going around in your society and you're helping us treat the people of Tuskegee better.

SHAWNA:

Ugh, that just makes me so uncomfortable.

CIARAN:

Yeah.

SHAWNA:

Okay.

CIARAN:

So...

SHAWNA:

It gets worse.

CIARAN:

Yeah, so, the guy, actually, who came up with the study, he resigned over that. But the University took it over. So...

SHAWNA:

And at what point did he resign? Was it like, at the end of the six months, or something?

CIARAN:

Uh, pretty much very early on. Um, just because—just, like, the whole deceiving bit didn't sit well with him so he just sort of stepped back from it. But at the end of the six months, they gave them the best treatment available, which was mercury ointments.

4 Our Sexual History

SHAWNA:

! But they had penicillin at that stage, didn't they?!

CIARAN:

Uh, they didn't have—no?

SHAWNA:

Okay.

CIARAN:

They didn't have peni—they hadn't established penicillin as a syphilis treatment.

SHAWNA:

Okay.

CIARAN:

So that was, uh, they hadn't really got effective penicillin at that point. They knew penicillin existed but they couldn't, sorta like, mass produce it.

SHAWNA:

Okay.

CIARAN:

So...

SHAWNA:

And they certainly weren't like going to use it on the African American population.

CIARAN:

Exactly.

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

So they gave them the best treatments they had available at the time that were cheap. Uh, which was the mercury ointment and an arsenic bismuth injection that was an

attempt to kill the bacteria through increasing your system toxicity. It was not—I mean, it was probably worse for you than for the bacteria. So...

SHAWNA:

Mmhm.

CIARAN:

...never really worked that well. And this was like, th—this—they basically find these treatments didn't help the men. And that's the point at which things *really* start to go off the rails because at that point the University made the decision that, "Okay, since they still have syphilis, we're not going to tell them and we're going to continue this study indefinitely."

SHAWNA:

Our listeners at home cannot see my face. It is one of disgust and shame for my country... okay, let's keep going with this fuckin' train wreck.

CIARAN:

Mmhm. So they—not only did they, ah, try to not tell the men they had syphilis. They tried to make sure that the men involved didn't go and get any outside medical care. They basically said to them, "Okay if you go to another doctor we're going to stop treating you."

SHAWNA:

[SARCASTICALLY] Because then you wouldn't have a control group...

CIARAN:

Yeah! So. But despite that, uh, two hundred and fifty of the men volunt—when World War II broke out—this is about—so this would be—America—so—right, nine years after the study had started. At this stage, like, it's been going off the books for about eight years. These men went and enlisted in the Army and, as part of that, they had a standard STI⁶ test. Now, the American Army was actually fairly enlightened and smart about syphilis and STIs in World War II...

⁶ sexually transmitted infection

SHAWNA:

Mmm.

CIARAN:

...They basically just gave out free, unlimited condoms to the men, no questions asked. And if you had an STI, the doctors—the Army doctors—had to treat you under complete anonymity. So, and they basic—they said, we don't want any stigma because we want people to come and get treated.

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

But in this case these men were told, "Okay, you have to go and get treated before you can join the Army."

SHAWNA:

Right...

CIARAN:

Because, and—so a lot of them did go and get treated then, but there wasn't really any effective treatment available then anyway.

SHAWNA:

So were they, then—so they were told that they had syphilis?

CIARAN:

Yes.

SHAWNA:

So, did they go back to the University and say, like, "Why did you lie to us?"

CIARAN:

Uh, apparently not? I think most of them just thought, "Oh, the University must not have known about this"? So, and in fact, uh, there are some stories that—and again, it's like, they weren't keeping detailed records on this for obvious reasons...

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

...But there are some stories that some of them went back to the University and the University told them, like, “Oh, they don’t know what they’re talking about. Don’t get treated”? So...

SHAWNA:

Oh my god.

CIARAN:

Yeah...

SHAWNA:

So how... how long did the study last?

CIARAN:

So, after the war, well—so by 1947, post-World War II treaties, based on the experiments the Nazis had carried out in concentration camps, meant that by this stage the study was illegal under international law. Plus, penicillin by now had been—well, we’ll get back to that—but, penicillin had been demonstrated as an effective cure...⁷

SHAWNA:

[MOCK HOPEFULLY] Okay, so clearly the University gave them penicillin and then shut down the—shut down the study. That’s—that’s the end of it, right? That’s what happened?

CIARAN:

Nope.

SHAWNA:

[RESIGNED] Goddammit.

⁷ Penicillin was demonstrated as an effective cure for syphilis and became the standard treatment by 1947.

CIARAN:

Kept monitoring them. Kept on going. By the mid-1960s—the really terrifying thing about this is this was a secret from the general public; this was not a secret in the medical community.

SHAWNA:

And how did they not get shut down?

CIARAN:

Well, 'cause people didn't care enough! And there was, like, at the time they were pu— there was no general definition of ethics. This is actually responsible. Like, the Tuskegee study is responsible for the official codifying of ethics for research in America.⁸ This is why they have ethics boards now, is because...

SHAWNA:

...of this one study.

CIARAN:

Yeah, and because people got away with this. So, like, they were publishing their results. Like, it was—it was in the mid-1960s that they published their results in a medical journal. And one doctor⁹ did write to them, going, "You have to shut this down! This is horrible!" And they ignored him. So, uh—so, the CDC,¹⁰ who were running it at this point, made the official decision, as recorded, that the study would continue "to completion." Which meant until all of the men...

SHAWNA:

...they died...

CIARAN:

...were dead and autopsied. By that stage, three quarters of the men were dead. Ninety percent of those who survived had actually been treated with penicillin, and didn't have

⁸ The National Research Act of 1974 was passed in response to various ethical breaches, but especially the Tuskegee syphilis study.

⁹ Peter Buxtun, in 1966. Other dissenters included Dr. Irwin Schatz in 1965 and Dr. William Carter Jenkins, an African American statistician who established a newsletter to call out racism in the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

¹⁰ The Center for Disease Control, now known as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (but still abbreviated CDC).

syphilis anymore. Because they had found that, like—they were—most of them were the men who'd been tested during World War II...

SHAWNA:

Mmm.

CIARAN:

...and had known that they had it. So, but, three quarters of them were dead. Uh, the guy who wrote to the, uh—now, he wasn't the only doctor, a lot of doctors did complain, to their credit, but the establishment made the decision, "No, we're not going to do anything." So one of them¹¹ decides, okay, he went to the press. And he got it published in the newspapers.¹² And at that stage, it all—it did all break loose. So. And at that stage, they did have to close it down because it was a huge public outcry. Now this is right around the time of, uh, Black Civil Rights marches, and so...

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

...that sort of thing was still ongoing, so the climate at the time, this burst like a bombshell. The idea that *this* was going on, that *this* was the level of regard... This is right around the same time that you're hearing stories about the Airmen being deliberately exposed to radiation and so on, so, yeah. And you've got the whole kind of—so like—this was definitely the best time for the public to react to it. But, huge thing, so—class action lawsuit against, like, that... sued, they were sued—and they won \$9 million for the men and their descendants. But at that stage, out of the 400 men—this is, maybe, thirty years later?

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

And they were all, like, fairly young men at the start of the study...

¹¹ Peter Buxton in the early 1970s

¹² in 1972

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

Seventy-four of them were still alive. A hundred and twenty-eight of them had died, either directly or indirectly as a result of their syphilis. Uh. Forty of them had infected their wives, and nineteen children with congenital syphilis had been born as a result of this study.

SHAWNA:

Eugh.

CIARAN:

So... and again—as I mentioned this is still a huge example of why you can't trust the establishment, to an awful lot of people in America.

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

And it's just sorta like, because—this was known. This was written about. There was an official government department that made the decision “We're going to let these people die of this.”

SHAWNA:

And it's amazing that, like... like, obviously, like, growing up in the States they teach you about the Civil Rights Movement, erm, and this is—this was just—this was the first time I'd ever heard of this, when you brought it up. And I just—it just shocks and, like, disgusts me...

CIARAN:

Mhm.

SHAWNA:

...that this could have ever have happened. And I know that our government has done far worse with the African American community but I just—there's just something about... lying to a community and telling them that they're healthy, and having this

going on in the background, and even when they *do* get tested and it's shown that they *do* have syphilis or whatever else, and they come back and the University are just like, "What? We're just going to keep going with this study."

CIARAN:

At least they didn't give them syphilis, though. Do you want to hear about the time that the U.S. Government gave people syphilis?

SHAWNA:

[DESPAIRS]

CIARAN:

[LAUGHS UNCOMFORTABLY]

SHAWNA:

Do we have to?

CIARAN:

Yeah.

SHAWNA:

Okay, let's...

CIARAN:

So this actually only came out in 2005. And this was the result of a researcher¹³ who was investigating Tuskegee and writing a book about it.

SHAWNA:

Mmm.

CIARAN:

And she came across these documents and immediately went, "Okay, now I'm writing a book about these instead" because this was mega. So this would have been 1946 to 1948, in Guatemala...

¹³ Dr. Susan Mokotoff Reverby

SHAWNA:

Okay.

CIARAN:

...which at the time was occupied by the U.S. Army, post-World War II. And this was around the time that penicillin was coming into... effect as a cure for syphilis. And a group of U.S. doctors there decided that they needed to test the efficacy of penicillin. And the easiest way to do that was to give people sy—make sure people had syphilis by giving it to them, and then treat them with penicillin to cure it.

SHAWNA:

[SIGHS UNCOMFORTABLY]

CIARAN:

Now, this... [LAUGHS UNCOMFORTABLY]

SHAWNA:

I just need to put my head on the table for a minute. Okay. Go ahead.

CIARAN:

The scary thing about this one is, this is exactly the same time as, like—this study is starting right when the Nuremburg Trials are going on.

SHAWNA:

Yeah.

CIARAN:

And it is fairly clear from the documents that this researcher¹⁴ found that they were aware that what they were doing was completely illegal. Which is why it was all buried and not dug out for sixty years. But, uh... yeah, they, uh—and this was actually—what's kind of interesting is that—so they did this in a Guatemalan prison. Uh. A bit earlier there'd been a study been done with gonorrhea in an American prison.¹⁵ And—but, in

¹⁴ Dr. Reverby

¹⁵ The Terra Haute prison experiments, performed from 1943–1944 in Terra Haute, Indiana. Actually, the principal investigator of the Terra Haute experiments was Dr. John C. Cutler, who also led the Guatemala syphilis experiments and participated in the late stages of the Tuskegee syphilis study.

that case the prisoners had all been volunteers and, uh, they got time off their sentence. And it was gonorrhea; it wasn't as bad a disease. And they just—it was all done in the open. Now these doctors wanted to do the same study but knew that they wouldn't get away with doing it with syphilis in America. So, it's just like, "Well, we're in Guatemala. We've got a prison. Why not go for it?" So they infected around, uh, thirteen hundred people with syphilis. Uh, some of them they infected clinically; some of them they just brought prostitutes who had syphilis into the prison. And, uh—and, uh, just passed it round the prisoners that way. And out of the thirteen hundred they infected, they treated about half of them.¹⁶ 'Cause it's not scientific if you treated them all...

SHAWNA:

Yeah...

CIARAN:

... You have to have a control group.

SHAWNA:

... UGH.

CIARAN:

Yeah. [UNCOMFORTABLE LAUGHTER] So they closed this down bec—basically the reason they closed it down in 1948 is they were terrified they were going to be exposed. But they were convinced that, "Oh, we're doing the right thing by this; we're advancing science," and, ugh.

SHAWNA:

But the Germans thought that, too.

CIARAN:

Yep.

SHAWNA:

[SIGHS]

¹⁶ More specifically, at least 678 people received treatment out of 1,308 participants.

CIARAN:

So, now both of these studies, U.S. presidents have apologized for. Bill Clinton actually apologized for Tuskegee in 1997 and President Obama apologized for the Guatemala incident in 2010, I think.

SHAWNA:

Mmhm.

CIARAN:

There's actually still a lawsuit going on among the descendants of those men against the U.S. Government, though, the position of the U.S. Government is "It was abroad. You can't sue the government for things they've done abroad. You start that, th—you start sui—that, then who knows what will happen?"

SHAWNA:

Yeah...

CIARAN:

But, uh, yeah.

SHAWNA:

[SIGHS DISGUSTEDLY]

SHAWNA:

Thanks again to Ciaran and, um, don't forget to subscribe. We'll see you next month.
Thanks, guys.

ANNOUNCER:

This podcast is part of the HeadStuff Podcast Network.