

The ethics of human medical experiments

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Medical researchers conducted radiation experiments on humans with funding from the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Energy, according to documents made public this week. This isn't as inhuman as it sounds. We do question some aspects of these tests, however.

Medical experiments on human beings were given a bad name by the Nazis, who conducted barbaric and lethal tests on concentration camp inmates during World War II. But the use of volunteers in medical experiments is an ethically defensible research method under the right circumstances. In 1900, for example, army doctor Walter Reed deliberately infected volunteers with yellow fever to discover how the disease is transmitted. The knowledge gained by this study made it possible to control yellow fever by eradicating mosquitoes, which saved untold thousands of lives. Even today, potentially dangerous drugs and surgical techniques are sometimes tested on severely ill patients — Barney Clark, for one — who are willing to act as guinea pigs.

There's no reason to categorically condemn human experiments when they involve radiation instead of experimental drugs. Precautions should be taken, in such studies, to prevent genetic damage from being passed on to a subject's offspring. This was apparently done in the AEC-DOE experiments, when prisoners who volunteered to have their testicles exposed to X-rays or cobalt were required to agree to vasectomies. Some of the inmates backed out of those agreements afterwards, but no test-related birth defects seem to have surfaced.

The radiation experiments are questionable in other respects, though. The use of prisoners, though a common practice at the time, was probably wrong. Inmates live under unusual conditions: they have little money and much tedium. Many of them are anxious to impress prison authorities with their willingness to do good. All of these factors can impel them to step forward when subjects are needed for potentially hazardous experiments. Inmates cannot be considered "volunteers" in the same sense that Hanford workers might be.

And human experiments that imperil a subject's health or life are always suspect, even when volunteers are used. Such tests shouldn't be conducted in the absence of a compelling medical need, or unless there's some chance that the experiment might benefit a terminally ill patient. Was there a compelling medical need, or perceived need, in this case? Did the threat to astronauts, nuclear workers and others justify human experimentation to establish exposure limits and identify remedies? These questions can't be answered easily, and they shouldn't be answered without understanding how researchers 20 years ago viewed the risk to their subjects. In any case, scientists have stopped these human experiments, partly as a result of their growing recognition of radiation hazards. That's an ethical decision everyone can agree with.

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