The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment: A Tragedy of Race and Medicine

James H. Jones, PhD

From 1932 to 1972, the United States Public Health Service (PHS) conducted a 40-year deathwatch over the lives of more than 400 black sharecroppers in Macon County, Alabama. In this desperately poor region of the Black Belt, PHS, working in conjunction with state, county, and local health officials, deliberately deceived the men into believing they were receiving the prescribed treatment for syphilis. This was a lie. The men were left grossly under treated or untreated so that scientists could observe and analyze the natural history of the disease. As a result, more than 100 of the subjects died from complications of syphilis. Rather than dismiss The Tuskegee Study as science gone mad, Professor Jones will offer a sophisticated examination of how well-intentioned professionals can commit great wrongs -- allowing race, class, and scientific curiosity to blind them to the fact that they were victimizing vulnerable members of our society.

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Dr. James H. Jones, Alumni Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, University of Arkansas, received his Ph.D. in American Social and Intellectual History from Indiana University and has held fellowships from The National Institute for Mental Health; The Grant Foundation; Harvard University; The Kennedy Institute for Ethics, Georgetown University; The Rockefeller Foundation; and The National Endowment for the Humanities. He is the author of two major books: Alfred C. Kinsey: A Private/Public Life and Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, A Tragedy of Race and Medicine. His articles have appeared in publications as diverse as "The New Yorker" and "The Hastings Report." Dr. Jones lives in Washington, D.C., where he is working on a book about David Vetter, the child who was known to the world as “the Bubble Boy.”