

From Press, to Public, to Politicians:

Exploring the Tuskegee Syphilis Study:

It's Impact on the Rights of Human Subjects and the Responsibilities of All in a
Democratic Society

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Process Paper:

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Medical history is an intriguing part of the past that has fascinated me since I was young. As a result, when I first heard about National History Day, I knew that I wanted to research a topic that had an impact on the medical industry. I also feel very passionate about equality for all, so it was only logical to tie in rights as well. I spent many days searching topics that led me to others, that then led me to even more; yet, I still did not uncover the perfect topic. Late one evening while looking over a chemistry history timeline torn from the Chemical and Engineering News, I shared all of my dead ends with my mother hoping that some topic would emerge from the conversation. It did! Well, rather, a list of promising ones did. In the midst of the hastily scrawled list was that of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in 1932. With a quick Wikipedia search and a brief explanation from my mother, I realized that my search was over. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study was the perfect topic for me, and it also fit the theme of this year's contest, Rights and Responsibilities, perfectly!

After nailing down my topic, the research became exciting and intriguing. I used a variety of sources coming from many different places. I checked out books from both the school library and the Boulder Public Library. While at the main branch, I scheduled a research appointment with a librarian, and she gave me the tools to find many beneficial eBooks online. Using school databases, I uncovered original newspaper documents regarding the study as well as written summaries of the events. My research led me deeper, and I combed through a handful of federal documents including 45 CFR 46 and the Belmont Report. The photos I used were found in books and online databases. I conducted my research at the library and at home, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

I have always loved acting, and my topic seemed as though it would work well in a performance. The events surrounding the Study were much entwined, so it would have been difficult to write a paper. An exhibit would limit the information, and a documentary was not appealing. I realized that a performance would allow me to express how someone from that time might have felt. It was the best way take the viewer back into the feel of society in the 1930's. Feeling can be lost in other categories. A performance can impart a more personal and realistic effect.

After gathering all the information I could, my next step was to start a script. I have to say, my first two attempts were displeasing. I was basically writing a paper, so the simplicity I had sought for in a performance was lost. Around the third try, I was finally getting usable writing. My fourth and final attempt was exceptional, and I managed to memorize it, and gather my props, pictures, and costumes all in the nick of time! The creation process was exciting as well as long, but I had never experienced such a feeling of content, excitement, and pride as when I finished my performance.

The theme for this year's National History Day contest is Rights and Responsibilities. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the events that followed led to a clear definition of human subject rights through legal rules/regulations and reports, as well as uncovering and defining not only the responsibilities of many in the medical field, but also in our entire society. The first piece to the puzzle was that of the media's right to free press. With that right came the media's responsibility to share information with the public. This led to the publication of the first news article about the study. The article drove a public outcry, so the public took responsibility for participating in democracy by demanding changes from the politicians and government. The politician's and government's response of establishing regulations governing the rights of human subjects closed the loop of this chain of rights and responsibilities that changed the way research involving humans is conducted in the US.