Obama Orders Review of Human Subject Protections
Citing Guatemalan Research Travesty

President Barack Obama has ordered a broad-based review to ensure that those who take part in U.S.-backed research are treated ethically in a response to the revelation that American scientists intentionally infected persons at a Guatemalan mental hospital with syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases in the 1940s. In a memo released on November 24, 2010 by the White House, Obama announced the formation of a commission to review of both federal and international standards to guard the health and well-being of research participants. The commission’s report is due in September, 2011.

Obama also ordered a fresh investigation into what happened in the widely condemned Guatemalan experiment. In that case, American scientists deliberately infected prisoners and patients in a mental hospital in Guatemala with syphilis and other STDs without their knowledge. It was an apparent effort to test if penicillin, then relatively new, could prevent some sexually transmitted infections. Top U.S. officials were quick to offer public apologies to Guatemala after an historian found evidence that the U.S. Public Health Service was involved in experiments between 1946 and 1948.

Research and IRB officials find the news of the Guatemalan study particularly disturbing because of its focus on using vulnerable populations without any sort of informed consent during an experiment in which the subjects were deliberately and covertly infected. Many consider the Guatemalan experiments to be worse than the infamous Tuskegee study because the individuals were deliberately infected while individuals in the Tuskegee study had already contracted syphilis.

While it is difficult to imagine 21st century research being conducted in as outrageous a manner as what happened six decades ago, those in the human subject protection community consider it a sobering reminder of the extra care that must be taken to protect the vulnerable. It is important for IRBs to worry about ethnic and economic vulnerability among the populations being studied.

Your comments are most welcome. Please submit to Mr. Edward M. Zablocki, UB Research Subjects Protection Program Administrator at zablocki@buffalo.edu