

"Useful Bodies: Humans in the Service of Medical Science in the Twentieth Century"

Jordon Goodman, Anthony McElligott, and Laura Marks, Editors, 2003, 217 pages, The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$45.00

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

"Useful Bodies: Humans in the Service of Medical Science in the Twentieth Century" provides thoughtful, objective and well-researched accounts of seven episodes in 20th-century medical research. With a refreshing lack of sensationalism, the essays offer fascinating details and perspectives on human experimentation conducted or funded by governments. Like the Nazi medical experiments, the experiments discussed in the book were conducted "for the greater good." The authors leave it to the reader to decide which, if any, of the experiments crossed the ethical line of sacrificing individual rights for the benefit of the community.

Historically, the practice of medicine has focused on the treatment of individual patients. Over time, public health programs that benefit populations (many people) rather than specific individuals have grown in importance. For example, although most vaccines carry a small but non-zero risk, we ask everyone to take that risk for the benefit of the community.

When people enroll in a clinical research study, they usually take a small but non-zero risk. The informed consent process gives them the opportunity, at least in theory, to make their own decision to participate. This book presents cases where governments dispensed with proper informed consent in the interest of public health objectives. To emphasize the ethical issues, the research experiments described in the book offered little or no potential for therapeutic benefit to the subjects.

The episodes include:

- Germ warfare tests in the open environment
- Studying malaria while treating neurosyphilis patients
- Jaundice (hepatitis) experiments on military personnel
- Hepatitis experiments on children
- Early radiation pharmacokinetics and therapeutic experiments
- Radioisotope experiments on comatose patients
- Atomic blast indoctrination of healthy military personnel

The questions raised in the book are still pertinent today. For example, clinical trials are conducted to evaluate emergency-room treatments of unconscious patients who are unable to give informed consent and have no authorized representative to speak on their behalf.

The book is available in bookstores.

Reviewer

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