In preparing America for nuclear attack during the Cold War years following World War II, thousands of US citizens became the innocent victims of over 4,000 secret and classified radiation experiments conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and other government agencies, such as the Department of Defense, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the Public Health Service (now the CDC), the National Institutes of Health, the Veterans Administration (VA), the CIA, and NASA.

Millions of people were exposed to radioactive fallout from the continental testing of more than 200 atmospheric and underground nuclear weapons, and from the hundreds of secret releases of radiation into the environment. Over 200,000 “atomic vets” who worked closely with nuclear detonations at the Nevada test site during the 1950s and 1960s were especially vulnerable to radiation fallout.

Also affected were the thousands of so-called “downwinders”, who lived in nearby small towns in Nevada, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico. These downwinders (along with the animal populations) suffered the worst cumulative radioactive effects of fallout, along with a contaminated environment teeming with radioactive food and farm products. The plight of these poor country people exposed to government-induced radiation sickness has been recorded in Carole Gallagher’s remarkable photo-essay American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War (The Free Press, 1993).

In reviewing declassified AEC records (now the Department of Energy) from the 1950s, Gallagher was shocked to discover one document that described the people downwind of the Nevada Test Site as “a low use segment of the population.” Her shock at such callous bigotry caused her to eventually move West to research, investigate and document those who lived closest to the Test Site, as well as workers at the site, and soldiers repeatedly exposed to nuclear bombs during the military tests.

Disinformation and Nuclear Fallout

In the nuclear arms race, government doctors and scientists brainwashed the public into believing low dose radiation was not harmful. Some officials even tried to convince people that “a little radiation is good for you.” Totally ignored was the knowledge that the radiation from nuclear fallout could lead to an increased risk of cancer, heart disease, neurological disorders, immune system disease, reproductive abnormalities, sterility, birth defects, and genetic mutations which could be passed on from generation to generation. The full extent of this radiation damage to the American public during the Cold War years
will never be known.

A secret AEC document, dated 17 April 1947, reveals that physicians were aware of these radiation hazards but simply ignored them. Under the title “Medical Experiments in Humans,” the memorandum read: “It is desired that no document be released which refers to experiments with humans that might have an adverse effect on public opinion or result in legal suits. Documents covering such field work should be classified ‘Secret’.”

According to Gallagher, many downwinders testified that the Public Health Service officials told them that their ‘neurosis’ about the fallout was the only thing that would give them cancer, particularly if they were female. Women with severe radiation illness, hair loss, and badly burned skin, were clinically diagnosed in hospitals as “neurotic.” Other severely ill women were diagnosed with “housewife syndrome.” When Gallagher’s investigation led her to ask a Department of Energy spokesperson about the AEC/DOE’s practice of waiting until the wind blew towards Utah before testing nuclear bombs or venting radiation in order to avoid contaminating Las Vegas or Los Angeles, the unabashed and unconcerned official actually said on tape, “Those people in Utah don’t give a shit about radiation.”

Secret Radiation Experiments

Only recently, with the forced release of Top Secret documents, have details been revealed about the unethical and inhumane radiation studies conducted during the Cold War years from 1944 to 1974. The initial story broke in November 1993 in a series of articles in the Albuquerque Tribune which identified the names of 18 Americans secretly injected with plutonium, a key ingredient of the atomic bomb and one of the most toxic substances known to man. Some, but not all, of the patients were terminally ill. This horrifying story by journalist Eileen Welsome (who later won a Pulitzer Prize) unleashed a storm of nationwide protest prompting Department of Energy Secretary Hazel O’Leary to order the release of secret files and documents pertaining to these Cold War experiments.

The extremely dangerous plutonium experiment was performed under the auspices of the government’s Manhattan Project, which brought together a revered group of distinguished scientists to develop and test the atom bomb. The purpose of these secret experiments was to establish occupational standards for workers who would be producing plutonium and other radioactive ingredients for the nuclear energy industry.

Some of the classified government experiments included:

* Exposing more than 100 Alaskan villagers to radioactive iodine during the 1960s.

* Feeding 49 retarded and institutionalised teenagers radioactive iron and calcium in their cereal during the years 1946-1954.

* Exposing about 800 pregnant women in the late 1940s to radioactive iron to determine the effect on the fetus.

* Injecting 7 newborns (six were Black) with radioactive iodine.

* Exposing the testicles of more than 100 prisoners to cancer-causing doses of radiation. This experimentation continued into the early 1970s.

* Exposing almost 200 cancer patients to high levels of radiation from cesium and cobalt. The AEC finally stopped this experiment in 1974.
* Administering radioactive material to psychiatric patients in San Francisco and to prisoners in San Quentin.

* Administering massive doses of full body radiation to cancer patients hospitalised at the General Hospital in Cincinnati, Baylor College in Houston, Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York City, and the US Naval Hospital in Bethesda, during the 1950s and 1960s. The experiment provided data to the military concerning how a nuclear attack might affect its troops.

* Exposing 29 patients, some with rheumatoid arthritis, to total body irradiation (100-300 rad dose) to obtain data for the military. This was conducted at the University of California Hospital in San Francisco.

**The Atomic Energy Commission**

In 1995 the Energy Department admitted to over 430 radiation experiments conducted by the Atomic Energy Commission between the years 1944 and 1974. Over 16,000 people were radiated, some of whom did not know the health risks or did not give consent.

These experiments were designed to help atomic scientists understand the human hazards of nuclear war and radiation fallout. Because the entire nuclear arms buildup was classified secret, these experiments were all stamped secret and allowed to take place under the banner of protecting “national security.”

Amazingly, these clandestine studies were conducted at the most prestigious medical institutions and colleges, including the University of Chicago, the University of Washington, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and the previously mentioned universities.

**Uranium Mine Workers**

In addition to these radiation experiments, workers who mined uranium for the AEC in the Four Corners area of Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico, were exposed to radioactive dust during the 1940s up to the 1960s. Although AEC scientists and epidemiologists knew the dust in these poorly ventilated mines was contaminated with deadly radon gas which could easily cause death from lung cancer, this lifesaving information was never passed on to the miners, many of whom were Native Americans. As a result, many miners died prematurely of cancer of the lung.

Stewart Udall, an Arizona Congressman and lawyer who also served as Secretary of the Interior during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, represented the miners and their families in a class action lawsuit against the federal government for radiation injuries. In The Myths of August, Udall writes that some physicians who defended the decisions of the atomic establishment sought to justify these experiments by contending that little was known about the health risks associated with the various exposures. Others tried to put a positive face on tests conducted without obtaining informed consent by maintaining that these experiments nevertheless produced advances in medical knowledge. Some physicians argued that the conduct of the AEC doctors should be condoned because they were merely following the ‘prevailing ethics’ of the postwar period. When the miners’ case finally came to trial in 1983, the federal court in Arizona dismissed the case by declaring the US government was immune from lawsuit.

**Medical Ethics of the Cold War**

How could these physician-experimenters ignore the sworn Hippocratic Oath promising that doctors will not harm their patients? Did they violate the Nuremberg Code of justice developed in response to the Nazi war crimes trials after World War II?
The Nuremberg Code includes 10 principles to guide physicians in human experimentation. In actuality, prior to the Nazi war crime tribunals, there was no written code for doctors; and lawyers defending the Nazi doctors tried to argue that similar wartime experiments were conducted with prisoners at the Illinois State Penitentiary, who were deliberately infected with malaria.

During the Nuremberg trials the AMA came up with its own ethical standards, which included three requirements: 1) voluntary consent of the person on whom the experiment is to be performed must be obtained; 2) the danger of each experiment must be previously investigated by animal experimentation; and 3) the experiment must be performed under proper medical protection and management.

The records now show that many victims of the government’s radiation experiments did not voluntarily consent as required by the Code. As late as 1959, Harvard Medical School researcher Henry Beecher viewed the Code “as too extreme and not squaring with the realities of clinical research.” Another physician said the Code had little effect on mainstream medical morality and “doubted the ability of the sick to understand complex facts of their condition in a way to make consent meaningful.”

Writing in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1996, Jay Katz recalls an argument at Harvard Medical School in 1961 suggesting that the Code was not necessarily pertinent to or adequate for the conduct of research in the United States. Katz writes: “The medical research community found, and still finds, the stringency of the NC’s first principle all too onerous.” But patients in medical experiments expect the experiment to help them in some way – not to harm them! Patients also are often inclined to totally trust their physicians not to harm them. In The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code, Katz concludes that many doctors view the Code as “a good code for barbarians but an unnecessary code for ordinary physicians.”

The President’s Advisory Committee

In January 1994 President Clinton convened an Advisory Committee to investigate the accusations surrounding the human radiation experiments. In their final report presented to the president on 3 October, 1995, the Committee found that up to the early 1960s it was common for physicians to conduct research on patients without their consent.

The Committee’s harshest criticism was reserved for those cases in which physicians used patients without their consent in experiments in which the patients could not possibly benefit medically. These cases included the 18 people injected with plutonium at Oak Ridge Hospital in Tennessee, the University of Rochester in New York, the University of Chicago, and the University of California at San Francisco, as well as two experiments in which seriously ill patients were injected with uranium, six at the University of Rochester and eleven at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. The plutonium and uranium experiments undoubtedly put the subjects at increased risk for cancer in ten or twenty years’ time.

The Final Report of the President’s Advisory Committee is now available in The Human Radiation Experiments, published in 1996 by Oxford Press. Although the Committee studied the experiments in depth, there was no attempt to assess the damage done to individuals. In many cases, the names and records of the patients were no longer available, nor was there any easy way to identify how many experiments had been conducted, where they took place, and which government agencies sponsored them. The Department of Health and Human Services, the primary government sponsor of research, had long since discarded files on experiments performed decades ago.

The Committee discovered “the records of much of the nation’s recent history had been irretrievably lost or simply could not be located” and “only the barest description remained” for the majority of the
experiments.

The Department of Energy also claimed all the pertinent records of its predecessor, the AEC, had been destroyed during the 1970s, but in some cases as late as 1989. All CIA records are classified. When records of the top secret MKULTRA program (in which unwitting subjects were experimented upon with a variety of mind-altering drugs) were requested, the CIA explained that all pertinent records had been destroyed during the 1970s when the program became a national scandal.

Keeping Government Secrets

The Committee made clear that its story could not have been told if the government did not keep some records that were eventually retrieved and made public. However, federal records management law also provides for the routine destruction of older records. Thus, in the great majority of cases the loss or destruction of requested documents was a function of normal record-keeping practices.

The Committee was dismayed to report: “At the same time, however, the records that recorded the destruction of documents, including secret documents, have themselves been lost or destroyed.” Thus, the circumstances of destruction (and indeed, whether documents were destroyed or simply lost) is often hard to ascertain.

In the Committee’s judgment the AEC had repeatedly deceived the public by denying it had engaged in human experimentation, and by issuing cover stories to cover-up secret investigations, and by deliberately supplying incomplete information to people who participated in government-sponsored biomedical research. It was clear that once government information was “born secret” it often remained that way.

The Committee concludes: “The government has the power to create and keep secrets of immense importance to us all.” Yet, without documents how can historians and other researchers uncover the truth about the government’s clandestine activities? Where is the ‘smoking gun’ when secret records are systematically shredded or reported as ‘lost’? We now know that many people were damaged during the government’s Cold War period of secrets and lies. But how can we uncover the medical and scientific secrets that remain hidden in the still classified documents from 1974 up to the present?

In the absence of medical records and follow-up, the ultimate fate of individuals who willingly or unwillingly “volunteered” for these experiments is not known. The Committee simply did not have the time or the resources to review individual files and histories. In many instances only fragmentary information survives about these experiments; whether people were harmed in these experiments could not be ascertained.

Current Secret Biomedical Experimentation

The US has the world’s largest arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. However, few people are aware of the covert biowarfare experiments conducted by various government agencies, particularly the military and the CIA.

For example, in August 1977 the CIA admitted to no less than 149 subprojects, including experiments to determine the effects of different drugs on human behaviour; work on lie-detectors, hypnosis, and electric shock; and the surreptitious delivery of drug-related materials. Forty-four colleges and universities were involved, along with fifteen research foundations, twelve hospitals or clinics, and three penal institutions. In the infamous MKULTRA mind-altering experiments, the victims were lured to hotel rooms for sexual encounters with prostitutes and were then drugged and monitored by CIA agents.

http://www.whale.to/a/cantwell9.html
Military biowarfare attacks against unsuspecting Americans in the 1950s and 60s are a documented reality. The most notorious was a six-day US military bioattack on San Francisco in which clouds of potentially harmful bacteria were sprayed over the city. Twelve people developed pneumonia due to these infectious microbes, and one elderly man died from the bioattack.

In other secret attacks, bacteria were sprayed into New York City subway tunnels; into crowds at a Washington, D.C. airport; and onto highways in Pennsylvania. Biowarfare testing also took place in military bases in Virginia, in Key West, Florida, and off the coasts of California and Hawaii.

For 50 years the shameful details of the government’s radiation experiments were kept secret from the public. In The Plutonium Files, Eileen Welsome notes the ethical horror that resulted from the melding of military and medical agendas during the Cold War. She credits the atomic bomb project’s public relations machine for downplaying the fallout controversy, the illnesses of the atomic veterans, and the diseases of the downwinders. The government propagandists simply placed the blame on sudden wind shifts, misinformed scientists, the overactive imagination of aging soldiers, and even Communist propagandists.

Welsome concludes: “The web of deception and denial looks in retrospect like a vast conspiracy, but in actuality it was simply a reflection of the shared attitudes and beliefs of the scientists and the bureaucrats who were inducted into the weapons program at a time of national urgency and never abandoned their belief that nuclear war was imminent.” She worries if what we have learned from the thousands of radiation experiment documents made public over the last several years will be remembered. Like the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes against humanity, the radiation experiments should never be forgotten.

In reviewing Welsome’s book for the Los Angeles Times (2 January, 2000), Thomas Powers asks: “If the government lied about the danger of nuclear testing, can we trust them to tell us the truth about acid rain, global warming or the safety of deep storage for nuclear waste?”

**Does Secret Medical Experimentation Continue?**

To this day there are no adequate safeguards to protect people from secret government experimentation. Since the mid-1970s we have witnessed the spectacular rise of genetic engineering and molecular biology, as well as the concomitant outbreak of new and mysterious diseases like AIDS, chronic fatigue syndrome, the peculiar “Four Corners” lung disease discovered on Navajo land, and the appearance of unprecedented “emerging” viruses never before seen on the planet.

Investigators linking the possible origin of these diseases to the dangerous engineering of new microbes are often dismissed as paranoids and crackpots. The mysterious Persian Gulf War syndrome is yet another recent illness clouded in military and biologic secrecy, with the origin and cause still debated and the medical records of sick veterans often “lost” or otherwise unavailable. Not surprisingly, the same government institutions that funded the radiation experiments now largely control the research, the funding, and the cover stories pertaining to all these new diseases and viruses.

What is clear from studying the Committee’s Final Report is that the medical and scientific professions collaborated with the government and the military to abuse and harm US citizens. In the process, the nuclear establishment literally got away with murder. And there is simply no end to the secrets that still emerge from the Cold War years that began 58 years ago with the Manhattan Project.

In January 2000, the government presented the results of a statistical study showing that atomic workers employed in the nuclear weapons industry during the Cold War were more likely to suffer a higher rate of cancer, due to their exposure to cancer-causing radiation and chemicals.

From the 1940s up to the present time, government lawyers and scientists have repeatedly rejected the
claims of workers who became sick as result of nuclear radiation and exposure to deadly uranium, plutonium, and fluorine. As many as 600,000 workers in 14 nuclear weapons plants are now affected by the government’s final admission of wrongdoing in exposing these people to cancer and other chronic illnesses.

According to a Los Angeles Times report, “workers told of spending years trying to get compensation payments from the state, of having to hire attorneys to get disability pay, of going to clinics that forced them to sign away rights to a portion of any future disability payment before they could be treated.”

Kay Sutherland, a worker at the Hanford plutonium plant in central Washington State, told a hearing that “the people in this area have been forced into poverty because they’ve had to retire in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, too young to get a retirement, and too young to get Social Security. They fall through the cracks and they die.” Sutherland has lost four of her five family members to disease, and has an enlarged liver and multiple tumours. She considers herself “a Holocaust survivor for the American Cold War.”

How can we stop these nuclear and biological horrors, which have condemned thousands of innocent people to disease and death? Why must decades of government-sanctioned medical abuse be kept secret and covered-up by scientists and physicians who claim to be concerned about the health of the public?

One way to prevent abuse might be to bring the physician-scientist perpetrators of these experiments to justice in a court of law. However, unless the public is aroused, this is unlikely to happen.

Writing in the Columbia Journalism Review, Geoffrey Sea notes: “A startling fact about the experiments is that, despite the documentation of hundreds of cases of unethical conduct resulting in lasting damage to thousands of people, not a single physician or nurse, scientist or technician, policy maker or administrator has yet come forward to admit wrongdoing.”

For over twenty years the law allowed the US Department of Defense (DoD) to use Americans as “guinea pigs.” This law (the US code annotated Title 50, Chapter 32, Section 1520, dated 30 July, 1977) remained on the books until it was repealed under public pressure in 1998. The new and revised bill prohibits the DoD from conducting tests and experiments on humans, but allows “exceptions.” One of the exceptions is that a test or experiment can be carried out for “any peaceful purpose that is related to a medical, therapeutic, pharmaceutical, agricultural, industrial, or research activity.” Thus, the 1998 law has obvious loopholes which allow secret testing to continue. For details on the restrictions (and exceptions) for human testing for chemical and biological agents, consult the Gulf War Vets website at http://www.gulfwarvets.com/1520a.htm.

Unethical and dangerous experimentation undoubtedly continues in secret up to the present time, ostensibly under the guise of “national security.” Thus, it would seem prudent for patients to think twice before signing-up for government-sponsored medical studies, particularly at leading medical institutions. Enlightened patients might also view doctors (and scientists) with a healthy dose of skepticism, and a touch of paranoia.

As weird as all this sounds, it could save your life!

References:


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