

# Guatemalans sue US over 1940s STD study

March 15 2011

---

Seven Guatemalans filed a class action lawsuit in Washington over a 1940s US study in which hundreds of people in the Central American nation were deliberately infected with syphilis and gonorrhea without their consent.

The suit by the Guatemalans, filed against the US Department of Health and Human Services, involves "medical experimentation that took place in Guatemala from... 1946 to 1948 and lasted potentially several decades more at the hands of American and Guatemalan doctors," read a copy of the suit, which AFP saw on Tuesday.

The suit also names "US government officials who continued to operate the program once it was established."

The Guatemalan study, which was never published, came to light in 2010 after Wellesley College professor Susan Reverby stumbled upon archived documents outlining the experiment led by controversial US doctor John Cutler.

The study "involved at least 700 test subjects and thousands of others were impacted" by the defendant's "non consensual human medical experimentation," the class-action complaint read.

President Barack Obama personally apologized to Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom in October when the case first surfaced, then ordered a thorough review of what happened.

The case, filed in US federal court, cites the Tuskegee Experiment in Alabama, in which hundreds of African-American men with late-stage syphilis were observed but given no treatment between 1932 and 1972. Cutler was also involved in that study, and those victims were compensated.

In Guatemala, Cutler and his fellow researchers enrolled 1,500 people, including mental patients, for the study, which aimed to find out if penicillin could be used to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Initially, the researchers infected female Guatemalan commercial sex workers with gonorrhea or [syphilis](#), and then allowed them to have unprotected sex with soldiers or prison inmates.

The head of a bioethics commission that Obama convened to look into the case said the [Guatemala](#) research was "clearly terribly wrong," and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the experiments as "clearly unethical."

The plaintiffs are seeking "compensatory and punitive damages... in an amount to be determined at trial."

The case is being handled by two US attorney firms, Florida-based Conrad & Scherer and New York-based Parker Waichman Alonso.

(c) 2011 AFP

Citation: Guatemalans sue US over 1940s STD study (2011, March 15) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-03-guatemalans-sue-1940s-std.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
---