

TESTIMONY ON MEDICAL EXPERIMENTATION IN HOLMESBURG PRISON
PRESENTED BY DOROTHY ALSTON
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE'S
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIMES AND CORRECTIONS
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My name is Dorothy Alston. I live at 6422 Haverford Avenue, Philadelphia, PA. I am 62 years old. I was in the House of Corrections in 1962 for approximately three months, and in 1963 for approximately four months.

During my stay at the House of Corrections I participated in two studies -- a tampon study in 1962 and a biopsy study in 1963. I heard of these studies by word of mouth and also through an inmate that worked in the nurses' office. The University of Pennsylvania people never solicited for test subjects -- they had others such as this inmate do that.

At the time I decided to participate in the University of Pennsylvania experiments largely because I needed money. I occasionally got money from my family or through writing letters for other inmates, but other than that I had no other source of income. I was trying to save up some money for when I got out in addition to buying commissary items such as cigarettes, soap, writing materials, and cosmetics. The experiments seemed like the only way I could get some money. There were only about 35 or 40 paying jobs (paying 25 cents a day) in the House of Corrections and there were over 100 women staying there. There

were no openings during the time I was in the House of Corrections

The first study I participated in was a tampon test in 1962, even though I wasn't normally a tampon user. At the time I was a pre-trial detainee without the resources to pay bail. I had been arrested for shoplifting two steaks. The University of Pennsylvania people gave us a survey to fill out. On the survey were questions such as what kind of flow we had, how many tampons we used per day, what our brand preference was. If I had been asked to sign a consent form I wasn't aware of it. We had to put our institution number on the survey as well, so that they could keep track of the results.

They gave us tampons according to our menstrual flow - heavy, medium, or light. We were given clean, plastic bags to put the tampons in after we had used them. I used one tampon and when I pulled it out I noticed that the head was loose cotton. I only used one more until I gave the rest of the tampons to another woman who completed the study in my place. After my period ended that month I had a bad pain in the bottom of my stomach. I had the nurse examine me and she said that maybe I should go to Philadelphia General Hospital (PGH) to have the cotton removed. I went there and had it removed because it had not come out before.

I received approximately fifteen dollars for participating in this study.

After I had participated in the tampon test a female inmate named Roberta Barns told me about another study -- a biopsy study. At the time my understanding of the study was that they would pull out flesh once. I agreed to do the study by telling Roberta Barns, who told the nurse, and then the University of Pennsylvania people came over to me. This was in 1963. There was no paperwork that I had to fill out before I participated in the biopsy study.

As I waited for the biopsy study I stood in line with the other women. The people conducting the study didn't let us talk to one another. A person with a white jacket that had a big "UP" on it came out and asked each of us our name. Only nine women were allowed to participate in the experiment. We lined up in the order that the person told us and we entered the room one by one. After the biopsy was performed they made us go out through another door that was a ways down from the first door so that we wouldn't talk to the other women still in line. I was the third person in line, so I did see the first woman come out of the other door where Gladys Mack Burnett (an officer) stood making sure that the women went back to their cells; the woman looked hurt.

When I went in to the room, they put my legs up in stirrups. They didn't use any anesthesia and they had a lot of instruments set out. They ripped flesh from my womb and it hurt terribly. They told me that if I only came in one time and didn't complete the study I wouldn't get my one hundred dollars. I had to come in four to six more times to complete the experiment. Each time they took a biopsy. This biopsy had to be done when I wasn't menstruating, so I didn't come in for a biopsy the week I was having my menstrual cycle. At the end of the experiment they told me that I would receive my money in seven to ten days. I received one hundred dollars for participating in this study.

At first I was excited to go in for the biopsy study. I thought the University of Pennsylvania people would do a pelvic exam on me first. I hadn't had a pelvic exam when I arrived to the House of Corrections because I was menstruating. At the time of my arrival they only tested my blood for syphilis. The prison was dirty and some of the women weren't very clean, and even the nurses' office and equipment weren't very clean, so I wanted to be examined to make sure that I was doing ok.

My normal menstrual cycle came every month and lasted only three to five days. There is no history of menstrual or gynecological problems in my family. About the time I got the money from the biopsy study (a month later) I started having

irregular menstrual cycles. My periods began to last longer. I complained to the nurse and she told me to see the University of Pennsylvania people. I went to the University of Pennsylvania people and they told me that they were at the prison for a different study, so they told me that they would send somebody else. No one else ever came though. I kept asking the University of Pennsylvania people I saw in the prison, but each time they just passed it off. I finally had to put in to see a social worker to have them call my family. I was hoping that my family could do something about the problem.

To see the prison doctor was a slow process. I had to put my name on a list and about 10 days later the doctor would come. He had a nasty attitude and would sometimes refuse to see inmates whose name had been put on the list. He'd say, "I've seen too many of you today. Go away." I put my name on the list and finally got to see the doctor once about my irregular bleeding. He gave me a couple aspirin and told me to go back to my cell and elevate my feet. I don't think he knew I was participating in the studies, but the nurse, Ms. Wolf, I think had seen me go in for the studies.

After the biopsy test I didn't participate in any more studies. When I got out of jail my medical problems relating to the studies I had participated in continued. I still had

irregular bleeding and my periods were lasting 12 to 13 days. The longest one of my periods lasted 22 days. Some days I couldn't get out of bed. I had to use towels to absorb the blood. I was 32 when I went to PGH where a doctor did a D&C. The irregular bleeding stopped for four months, but then it began again and I thought it wouldn't stop. I went to Einstein Northern and checked in to a gynecology clinic there. The doctors gave me a shot to stop the bleeding. It slowed my menstruating down, but it started again. They gave me pills -- birth control pills I believe -- and that helped a little bit. I went to the emergency room three different times for a transfusion. On the last visit to the emergency room they put me in the hospital.

The doctors had tried everything they knew how at this point. I had followed all of the instructions they had given me. They said now that the only way possible to stop the problem was to remove my uterus -- a partial hysterectomy. I was only 34 years old. I was devastated.

At the height of my life I felt like my life was over. I couldn't function as a female anymore. My husband and I had separated because our sex life had been very limited during this time due to my constant bleeding and discomfort. Our dreams of having a big family had been completely stopped. I was very

depressed. I thought of suicide, but I never formed a plan. I had a nervous breakdown and I don't remember next three years of my life when I was institutionalized in a hospital. First I was in the mental ward at PGH, and then they sent me to Byberry State Hospital.

I experienced this at too young of an age. It's a hell of a mental thing not to function as a woman. I went to psychiatrists and women's groups to try to help myself.

I feel used and deceived. I feel that the University of Pennsylvania took advantage of us because of our vulnerable position as prisoners. I think the University of Pennsylvania robbed me of my youth.

I would like to see the University of Pennsylvania stop research studies like this. I want them to use better experimental methods. I want them to explain their experiments to those people who participate in them so they can make a knowledgeable decision as to whether or not to participate.