

TESTIMONY ON MEDICAL EXPERIMENTATION IN HOLMESBURG PRISON
PRESENTED BY ALFONSO SKORSKI
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE'S
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIMES AND CORRECTIONS
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My name is Alfonso Skorski. My address is 2379 Duncan Street, Philadelphia, PA. I am 49 years old. I was incarcerated from 1970 to late 1973 or early 1974. During my approximately three years in prison I spent the first two years at Holmesburg Prison, and then I was transferred to the House of Corrections for approximately a year. I finished my sentence while on a work release program. While I was in prison there I participated in two University of Pennsylvania studies.

The first study I participated in was a cosmetic patch test. Someone in the knit mill where I worked told me about the University of Pennsylvania experiments that were going on. I went to the prison guards and asked them if I could get signed up for these experiments. They said it was no problem. After that a couple guys dressed in long white coats came to me. I assumed they were doctors because of the way they were dressed, but I don't know who they were actually. These guys said that I could sign up for this patch test. They told me that there would be no side effects, damage, or harm. I also didn't see any forms, like consent forms, which also would have made me suspicious and probably caused me to not do the experiments. The guys looked

like professional men, and I was in pretty good shape so I believed them when they said that the experiment wouldn't hurt me.

To do the cosmetic patch test I went to the University of Pennsylvania cell block where the experiments took place. They put some sort of a substance on my left arm and on my back shoulder blade. They covered that with gauze and then used medical tape to hold the gauze in place. I wore that patch about three or four days and then they removed it. I was paid only a little bit for this test -- approximately five dollars.

The other study I participated in was an athletes foot test. The year was 1970, or early 1971. I was told I could get ten times more money for this test, about \$40.00 or \$50.00 -- it made it appealing. I worked at the knit mill in the prison, but that only paid 25 cents per day. I needed some money to buy some necessities such as toothpaste, soap, shampoo, combs, and cigarettes -- one of the few things I could enjoy while in prison.

For the test I went back to the block where the University of Pennsylvania experiments took place. I don't remember signing a consent form. They asked for my name and number so that they could pay me, and then they told me that they were testing an athlete's foot deterrent. They sprinkled powder on my right foot

and then they placed a plastic bag over my foot. The plastic bag went up to the middle of my calf. Then they wrapped the plastic tight with duct tape to create a vacuum. They said they needed heat and moisture.

I wore the plastic bag over my foot for one week. I was told that if I took it off I wouldn't get paid for the test. I returned to the University of Pennsylvania testing block with three other guys that had also done the athletes foot test. They took off the plastic that had covered our foot and I thought I was going to faint because of the test. I immediately gagged. They didn't do anything to help the smell in the room. I just had to put up with it for about 10 minutes until they were finished. I went back to the showers to wash off that smell and I didn't think any more of the test.

About a week went by and one morning as I got out of bed I fell down to my knees. My right foot had no feeling. I couldn't control it or lift it. I stood up straight and walked by taking a step forward with my left foot and dragging my right foot. I was very upset and concerned about what was happening with my foot. In prison you can't show any weakness. I was worried that if I was crippled that other inmates would treat me badly -- that they would steal my stuff or harm me. I wanted to do something immediately.

I went to the sergeant of the guards and asked if I could go to the doctor. When I saw the prison doctor, but he couldn't explain what was happening to my foot. At the time I didn't connect what was happening to the experiment I had participated in the week before for the University of Pennsylvania. I didn't tell the doctor about the experiment, so I'm not sure if he knew that I had participated in it.

I was shipped to the PGH hospital about two days after seeing the prison doctor. Several doctors came in to see me in the examining room. My vital signs were ok, but I still had no feeling in my foot. Finally a ^{nurse} specialist came in and did a probe on my foot. The specialist diagnosed me with nerve damage. The nerve had been severed right where the bag had been wrapped with duct tape. I had never had nerve problems before this.

I was next sent to St. Luke's Hospital, located on 8th and Gerard. I stayed in the prison ward there for one month. Everyday I would go into a therapy room and the nurse would put the probes on my foot and below my knee for about an hour. An impulse was sent through about every 15 seconds. With this therapy they made another nerve connection to replace the nerve that had become severed.

At St. Luke's they also made a brace for me. They placed a metal plate in the right foot of one pair of shoes. There were

also two metal strips that went up the sides of my right leg up to the knee. I still had to drag my foot, but with the brace the foot was in an upright position. When I left the hospital and returned to prison, I wasn't given any medication; they just said, "let's hope this heals."

I wore the brace for one year. Every evening I would take the brace off and work the muscle myself. Slowly the feeling came back in my foot. I don't have to wear the brace to keep my foot up. But, even today if I don't concentrate my foot will still droop causing me to trip.

I have also experienced emotional distress because of this. I haven't been back in prison since my time in Holmesburg and the House of Corrections and I have put that part of my life behind me. I still have this reddish discoloration on my skin, though. I don't wear shorts because that foot looks ugly and I don't want to have to explain to others -- especially my children -- how I came to get this scar. I don't get to do simple things, like go swimming at the beach with my children, because then they would see this problem with my foot and ask me questions that I don't want to answer.

It wasn't until I heard the other former inmates' stories that I connected my foot problems with the University of Pennsylvania's athletes' foot test. Learning this has finally

given me peace of mind about why my foot had the trouble it did.

I want to see something done about this so it will never happen again. I don't want others to be put in the position where they are a human guinea pig.