

E-mail Interview with Dr. Stuart Youngner

Interviewer: How has the Tuskegee study shaped the field of bioethics and the training of modern doctors?

Youngner: Tuskegee was a seminal event and, arguably, the one that gave modern bioethics its beginning in the USA. After World War II, we had established some guidelines for the ethical conduct of research in the Nuremberg trials of Nazi doctors. But, nearly 30 years later, we discovered that egregious violations of human rights were occurring in our own country. The Tuskegee Syphilis experiment woke us up to how vulnerable all human subjects of research are and how they must be protected if the research enterprise is to continue. It led to a national commission and the Belmont Report, which laid out the parameters for responsible conduct of research. It energized the medical research and legal communities to form a national system of IRBs to regulate all research with human subjects. Other abuses of research subjects came to light about the time of Tuskegee and continue to surface. Bioethics also got a boost with the advent of life-sustaining technology and the dilemmas it poses, but Tuskegee was, in my opinion, the key event that got bioethics going.