Overview

From 1932 to 1972, the United States government conducted medical trials on 399 African-American men in Macon County, Alabama. The “Tuskegee Experiment,” as it is known, began as an attempt to assess racial differences in the presentation and treatment of syphilis. However, as the experiment progressed, the men were denied access to penicillin (an effective treatment of syphilis) and were discouraged from pursuing information about their conditions, in defiance of the Nuremberg Code of ethics for experimentation developed after World War II.

CWL 315: Literature and Medicine is an interdisciplinary examination of the complex relationship between our human experience of illness, disability, and health; the medical professions and its practitioners; and the role of narratives in our understanding thereof. The course, in both its online and in-person incarnations, incorporates material from literature, journalism, film, sociology, philosophy, and—of course—medical case histories to frame our discussion of questions of wellness, illness, gender, race, class, disability and impairment, and identity. This is a multi-section course each semester, and enrolls about 400 students per year.

This three-hour ethics module examines the historical and social context of the experiment, as well as corresponding situations in American public health (i.e., the 1950s “Bowery Study”), in order to help students develop an understanding of the ethics of medicine, public health, and patient rights.

The interdisciplinary focus of the module, which is central to the course, emphasizes historical data, primary documents, and fictional narratives that pertain to the study. We examine the responses of the doctors involved, the text of the 1997 US apology to the victims of the experiment, and David Feldshuh’s Pulitzer-finalist play *Miss Evers’ Boys*, a fictionalized representation of the ethical ambiguity of the nurse who oversaw the patients and interfaced between the patients and the doctors.

Students will gain knowledge of the experiment, the vocabulary to discuss ethical issues in medical practice, an understanding of the challenges of public health, and a thorough grounding in the interdisciplinary study of medical humanities. Their understanding of the important historical, cultural, and ethical considerations at play in the Tuskegee Experiment will be assessed through in-class discussion, a short group presentation, and individual essays.

**Learning Objectives**

- Develop an understanding of the history of medical ethics in the United States.
- Assess historical events in light of ethical considerations.
- Explore interdisciplinary engagements with medical ethics with particular attention to the medical humanities.
- Demonstrate the ability to synthesize historical data and ethical concepts.
- Apply ethical concepts to specific situations relevant to public health, race, and class.
- Practice and demonstrate mastery of the conventions of academic prose.
Assessment Methods

- In-class discussion of the cultural context and relevant literary and historical texts is assessed based on individual participation in the class discussion.
- The group presentation is a 5-slide Powerpoint that synthesizes the primary documents, relevant ethical framework, and history of medical ethics in the United States and the relationship of those ethics to the Tuskegee Experiment.
- The essay asks students to understand Feldshuh’s *Miss Evers’ Boys* in light of the cultural research covered in class lectures, discussions, and the group presentations. Students will assess the relevance of literary works for understanding historical questions related to medical ethics and public health.

Day One: The Tuskegee Experiment and Its Impact

The Powerpoint lecture (attached) is the skeleton of the three course periods (total 3 hours, 45 minutes) devoted to the ethics module. Students prepare for the module by reading David Feldshuh’s *Miss Evers’ Boys*; throughout the module, they are encouraged to research the Tuskegee Study in preparation for their group presentation and essay.

The first day of the module focuses on providing historical context for the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in order to aid student development of an understanding of the history of medical ethics in the United States. The study is contextualized within similar studies that took place both in and outside of the United States. The class considers the raw historical information, and then closely analyzes selected passages from President Clinton’s apology to the victims of the Tuskegee Study, the Nuremberg Code for medical ethics, and the Principle of Patient Rights.

Prior to the conclusion of Day One, students are asked to respond to Synthesis Questions that ask them to demonstrate the ability to synthesize historical data and ethical concepts and apply ethical concepts to specific situations relevant to public health, race, and class.

Day Two: The People in the Tuskegee Experiment

The second day of the course module focuses on two related elements: the historical personages involved in the Tuskegee Study, and the fictionalized portrayal of those people in David Feldshuh’s play *Miss Evers’ Boys*. Within that framework, students continue to assess historical events in light of ethical considerations, while developing the ability to explore interdisciplinary engagements with medical ethics with particular attention to the medical humanities.

Students are asked to negotiate between the fictional material in *Miss Evers’ Boys* and the words of a doctor associated with the study. They are asked to apply the humanistic model of close reading to historical documents, and through that application to develop a sense of the practices of medical humanities.

Prior to the conclusion of Day Two, students are asked to respond individually and in groups to Synthesis Questions that ask them to demonstrate the ability to apply humanistic inquiry to a historical medical ethics situation.
Day Three: *Miss Evers’ Boys*

The third day of the module focuses on closely interpreting David Felshuh’s *Miss Evers’ Boys* in order to explore the implicit arguments made by the author, himself a physician, about the ethical challenges of the Tuskegee Study. The day begins with the instructor modeling the process of *close reading* in order to refresh student understanding of this skill and address the literary and dramatic elements relevant to a reading of the play in context.

Students are then guided through a series of group- and class-based discussion activities centered on specific passages from the text. As they proceed through the discussion modules, students begin to develop a nuanced understanding of both the ethical issues raised by the historical study (the focus of Day One and part of Day Two) as well as the perspective on those ethical issues implied in *Miss Evers’ Boys*.

By the conclusion of Day Three, students will have developed an understanding of the history of medical ethics in the United States, assessed historical events in light of ethical considerations, explored interdisciplinary engagements with medical ethics with particular attention to the medical humanities, and demonstrated the ability to synthesize historical data and ethical concepts. Throughout all three days, students will have applied ethical concepts to specific situations relevant to public health, race, and class. The penultimate discussion module of Day Three focuses on students practicing and demonstrating mastery of the conventions of academic prose through the formulation of a thesis statement.

**Post-Module Assessment**

After the three-day instructor- and discussion-based class work, students submit two separate assignments. The first is a five-slide Powerpoint group presentation on the Tuskegee Study, its context, its impact, and the ethical challenges raised by the study. The second is an individual essay in which the student explains and assesses the ethical considerations relevant to the Tuskegee Study and the field of medical humanities as a whole, with particular attention to Feldshuh’s play and the student’s application of ethical frameworks to historical and fictionalized situations.