NY Fund Apologizes to Tuskegee Syphilis Study Descendants

The organization apologized for its role in the Tuskegee syphilis study, acknowledging its ties to systemic racism in the United States.

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Fifty years after it was revealed that hundreds of African-American men with syphilis had gone untreated while participating in the infamous Tuskegee Study, a New York fund has apologized for its role in the disgraced program.

In July 1972, the public learned that the 40-year government experiment in the Tuskegee, Alabama, area had allowed the infection to progress unchecked in its participants so that scientists could study its effects.

Throughout the study, the Milbank Memorial Fund provided monetary assistance to the families of the men who died as a result of the illness—under one condition. To receive the money for funeral costs, which amounted to no more than $100, widows or loved ones had to agree to let doctors perform autopsies on the victims so that they could detail the impact of the condition they referred to as “bad blood.”

Earlier this month, the Milbank Memorial Fund publicly apologized to the descendants of the study’s victims. “It was wrong. We are ashamed of our role. We are deeply sorry,” Christopher F. Koller, the president of the fund, told Time magazine.

Generations later the lingering mistrust of the medical establishment experienced by many Black people today is known as the “Tuskegee effect.”

The apology was accompanied by a donation to the descendants’ group, the Voices of Our Fathers Legacy Foundation, at a ceremony in Tuskegee attended by the children and other relatives of the men in the study.

The president of the Voices foundation, Lillie Tyson Head, whose late father Freddie Lee Tyson participated in the study, said, “[The apology is] really something that could be used as an example of how apologies can be powerful in making reparations and restorative justice be real,” said Head.

Milbank's role in the study was widely unknown to the descendants' group until Koller contacted Head last fall. "It really was something that caught me off guard," she said.

This apology comes at a time when institutions such as Harvard and Georgetown are acknowledging their ties to systemic racism and slavery.

"It's really important because at a time when the nation is so divided, how we come to terms with our racism is so complicated," Head said. "Confronting it is difficult, and they didn't have to do this. I think it's a really good example of history as restorative justice."

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