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Survivors Get No Care in Ended Syphilis Study

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Now that a controversial U.S. Public Health Service syphilis experiment has ended, the federal government has no legal means to deliver health care to those who survived the test.

Officials at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, parent agency of the service, say that they no longer have authorization or funds to continue physical examinations and medical treatment for the 74 Alabama men who survived the 40-year Tuskegee Study.

One official has called the matter "merely an administrative problem" for which a solution was being sought. He could offer no estimate on how long the solution might take.

The Tuskegee syphilis study began in Macon County, Ala., in 1932 and ended after public disclosure of the project last year. More than 400 poor, rural black men with syphilis were denied treatment for the disease so that doctors could study damage eventual autopsy the damage untreated syphilis does.

At least 29 of the men died as a direct result of untreated syphilis and many others may have been crippled.

When existence of the study was disclosed last summer, HEW appointed a citizens panel to investigate the experiment. Last fall, the panel recommended that the study be ended immediately and that survivors be given all needed medical treatment. HEW said it would comply.

Dr. R.C. Backus, an HEW official serving as executive secretary to the current Tuskegee Study advisory panel, said that as long as the study continued, doctors had the authority to provide regular check-ups and medical care to the survivors, when the study ended, so did that legal authority, however, but Backus insisted "the survivors won't suffer."

A spokesman for the Center for Disease Control, the Atlanta-based division of the Public Health Service in direct control of the study, said in an interview that at this point it is very difficult to tell how long the break in health care will be.

"We are trying to get authorization . . . to treat these people as beneficiaries," said George Stenhouse. "We want to provide them with total medical care, but there is no existing legislation . . .

"We're thinking about drafting special legislation and we're looking at some alternatives. We want to comply with the panel's recomendations but at the moment we haven't the means."