



Original Research

Human Medical Experimentation with Extreme Prejudice: Lessons from the Doctors' Trial at Nuremberg^{☆,☆☆}

Anne L. Craig, MBChB, FANZCA^a, Sukumar P. Desai, MD^{b,*}

^a Department of Anaesthesia, Auckland District Health Board, Auckland, New Zealand

^b Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 March 2015

Accepted 17 June 2015

Keywords:

Nuremberg Trial

Nazi medicine

World War II

Doctors' Trial

Research ethics

ABSTRACT

At the conclusion of World War II in Europe, officials and agents of the German Regime were tried for crimes against humanity in the Palace of Justice, Nuremberg, Germany. The main Nuremberg Trial took place before the International Military Tribunal, and 23 political and military leaders were tried between November 20, 1945, and October 1, 1946. Of the subsequent series of 12 trials, we focus our attention on the Doctors' Trial, in which 23 physician and nonphysician defendants were tried for human experimentation and mass murder. Of the 23 defendants, seven were acquitted, seven were executed, and the rest received prison sentences. We were able to identify one individual who remained a conscientious objector and did not participate in the conduct of these experiments. We examine details of their actions, their defense strategies, and their verdicts and offer explanations for how members of the medical profession could possibly participate in such unethical practices. More than 100 countries now have rules and regulations that govern medical experimentation on human subjects.

© 2015 Anesthesia History Association. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Background

The *Medical Case, U.S.A. vs. Karl Brandt, et al.* (also known as the Doctors' Trial), was prosecuted in 1946–1947 against 23 physicians and administrators.^{1–3} The defendants were accused of organizing and participating in war crimes and crimes against humanity by conducting medical experiments and procedures on both prisoners and civilians.^{2–6} More than 70 medical research projects were conducted in concentration camps run by the Nazi political party (derived from its full German name *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) between 1939 and 1945.^{2,3,7,8} The experiments were cruel, and the subjects were usually killed at the end of the experiments.^{9–13} The victims numbered in the hundreds of thousands and included Jews, Poles, Roma, political prisoners, Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, and Catholic priests.¹⁴ Only a handful survived.^{2,3}

We examine the characteristics of the individuals charged with these crimes, the nature and utility of the experiments, the subjects on whom they were carried out, the defense strategy used by their lawyers, and the verdicts. We explore why members of a profession

trained to relieve pain and suffering participated in such “experiments” and examine how these studies influenced the subsequent development of regulations for the protection of subjects in human experimentation. Lastly, we point out and explain how variants of such behavior persist today, yet they cannot be compared to the overwhelming corruption of physicians which enabled the Nazi atrocities to occur.

The End of World War II

The war ended when Germany surrendered to the Allied Forces on May 7, 1945. Although details about life in Nazi concentration camps had been circulated by the Western press, the true horrors of these camps became evident only after allied troops liberated the surviving prisoners. Moral outrage and disgust propelled the victorious forces to hold a series of trials at Nuremberg to bring to justice the perpetrators of the many crimes against humanity. The majority of the accused were high-ranking officials of the Nazi regime, but one segment of the trials consisted of charges brought against individuals who conducted cruel medical experiments on human subjects. The former is beyond the scope of this article, and we restrict our study to the trials against medical research personnel.

Physicians, more than any other group of professionals (including lawyers, judges, engineers, etc), voluntarily joined the Nazi party. The vast majority of German physicians were complicit with abhorrent Nazi policies but were not part of the Doctors' Trial, which was

☆ This work was supported by intramural funds.

☆☆ This work was presented, in part, at the 19th Annual Spring Meeting of the Anesthesia History Association Hartford, Connecticut, May 2–4, 2013.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, 75 Francis Street, Boston, MA 02115. Tel.: +1 617 525 7921; fax: +1 617 277 2192.

E-mail address: sdesai@partners.org (S.P. Desai).

merely the tip of the iceberg. Most continued their medical careers after the war while some, such as the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele, escaped prosecution overseas.

The Nature of the Experiments

One group of studies examined the physiologic response to extreme physical conditions—hypoxia as might be encountered by pilots flying at high altitude, hypothermia as might be experienced by pilots downed in the sea, and how long subjects could survive exclusively on sea water.^{2,3} Another set of studies was aimed at survival after exposure to poisonous agents such as mustard gas, phosphorus used in incendiary bombs, phenol, and various poisons used in bullets or added to food.^{2,3} A third set of experiments involved evaluating the efficacy of vaccines after exposure to infectious agents, including typhus, cholera, malaria, hepatitis, and smallpox. In addition, the efficacy of sulphonamides in treating wound infections was studied.^{2,3} A miscellaneous group of experiments evaluated the efficacy of bone, muscle, and nerve regeneration and transplantation, methods of mass sterilization, and euthanasia (for those with incurable tuberculosis, mental retardation, and other undesirable conditions).^{2,3} In yet another study, more than 100 Jewish prisoners were executed and their skeletons examined for any distinct features.^{2,3} In these and other medical experiments, the actions of researchers appeared to be unencumbered by ethical considerations, and subjects were routinely executed at the end of the trials so that tissue specimens could be examined.^{2,3} Many Nazi victims had their bodies used (without consent) by anatomy departments throughout Austria and Germany.¹⁵

Table 1 provides a summary of the experiments conducted—details have been published previously.^{2,3}

Defendants, Counsel, Defense Strategy, Witnesses, Judges, and Verdicts

Twenty-three individuals were charged during the proceedings—22 men and 1 woman (Table 2). Twenty were physicians, while 3 were Nazi officials.^{2,3} Offenses were classified into the 4 categories listed in Table 3.^{2,3} The nature of the charges varied from membership in an organization, conspiracy to commit crimes, and the actual commission of crimes against prisoners or other individuals not protected by rules of war. The individuals charged served under various medical or research services and were stationed at several large concentration camps.

A team of 27 attorneys was assigned to represent the 23 defendants. Some attorneys represented more than one defendant, and more than one attorney represented some defendants.^{2,3} All attorneys were recruited from Germany, but we have been able to ascertain neither the circumstances under which they were recruited nor the conditions under which they undertook their duties. The defense teams argued that the medical experiments took place because of military necessity or the national emergency presented by war. They claimed that the medical experiments had been useful in furthering medical science; that this had contributed to medical progress; and finally that, in certain cases, there was no alternative to conducting such experiments on human beings. They also argued that the experiments differed little from previous American or German ones and tried to show that no international law differentiated between legal and illegal human experimentation.^{2,3}

The prosecution argued that voluntary participation by the subject of experimentation was a prerequisite of legal experiments and that no consent was obtained from any of the experimental subjects. They also argued that the experiments turned out to be entirely useless for medical science or human progress and that, in some cases, it

Table 1

Details of experiments conducted by defendants charged in the Doctors' Trial at Nuremberg.

| Experiments | Individuals |
|--|--|
| High-altitude experiments | Becker-Freyseng, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Handloser, Mrugowsky, Poppendick, Romberg, Ruff, Schroeder, Sievers, Weltz |
| Freezing experiments | Becker-Freyseng, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Handloser, Mrugowsky, Poppendick, Schroeder, Sievers, Weltz |
| Malaria experiments | Blome, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Handloser, Mrugowsky, Poppendick, Rostock, Sievers |
| Mustard ("lost") gas experiments | Blome, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Handloser, Rostock, Sievers |
| Sulfanilamide experiments | Becker-Freyseng, Blome, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Fischer, Gebhardt, Genzken, Handloser, Mrugowsky, Oberheuser, Poppendick, Rostock, Schroeder |
| Bone, muscle, and nerve regeneration and bone transplant experiments | K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Fischer, Gebhardt, Handloser, Oberheuser, Rostock |
| Seawater experiments | Becker-Freyseng, Beiglboeck, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Handloser, Mrugowsky, Poppendick, Rostock, Schaefer, Schroeder, Sievers |
| Epidemic jaundice experiments | Becker-Freyseng, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Handloser, Mrugowsky, Poppendick, Rose, Rostock, Schroeder, Sievers |
| Typhus ("spotted fever") and other vaccine experiments | Becker-Freyseng, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Genzken, Handloser, Hoven, Mrugowsky, Poppendick, Rose, Rostock, Schroeder, Sievers |
| Poison experiments | Gebhardt, Genzken, Poppendick |
| Incendiary bomb experiments | Gebhardt, Genzken, Mrugowsky, Poppendick |
| Sterilization experiments | Brack, K. Brandt, R. Brandt, Gebhardt, Mrugowsky, Oberheuser, Pokorny, Poppendick |
| Skeleton collection | R. Brandt, Sievers |
| Tubercular Polish nationals | Blome, R. Brandt |
| Euthanasia | Blome, Brack, K. Brandt, Hoven |
| Phenol (gas edema) experiments | Handloser, Hoven, Mrugowsky |
| Phlegmon experiments | Fischer, Oberheuser, Poppendick |
| Polygal experiments | Blome, Handloser, Poppendick, Sievers |
| Twin experiments | J. Mengele |

was doubtful if considerations of medical science played any role in the decision to conduct the experiments.^{2,3} At best, they could be described as "pseudoscience." The hypothermia experiments were the ones most studied after the war. Robert Berger, a Hungarian Jew who emigrated to the United States at age 15 years and who later became a cardiothoracic surgeon, reviewed these experiments and concluded that they were fraudulent, unscientific, and of no value.¹⁶

The defense team argued that the entire German medical profession should not be condemned, that proven cases of abuse should be viewed as actions of individuals, and that similar abuses probably occurred in other professions during Hitler's rule. "These were individual acts arising perhaps partly from personal criminal tendencies of individual fanatics, partly from being connected with the excesses of a total war in a dictatorship of unscrupulous violence."²

Prosecutor Brigadier Telford Taylor argued the defendants carried out these criminal experiments as a result of the influence of the Nazi regime on German medicine and ethics.² Eighty-four witnesses testified at the trial. Many had firsthand experience as prisoners in the camps, and some were survivors of these medical experiments. They described the experiments and atrocities to which they were subjected, showed resulting permanent disabilities and scars, and identified individuals who conducted these experiments.^{2,3}

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1082312>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1082312>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)