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Guatemala STD study was 'wrong': US panel

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The head of a bioethics commission convened by President Barack Obama said on Tuesday that a 1940s study of STDs using patients in Guatemala was wrong and that a US probe was continuing.

"What happened was clearly wrong," said Amy Gutmann, who chairs the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, at a meeting to discuss progress in the Obama-ordered review of human protection in medical research.

"It was clearly terribly wrong and we want to get the facts out there," said Gutmann, who also announced the formation of a 13-member international panel of experts to examine the ethics of medical research around the world.

Executive director of the US bioethics commission, Valerie Bonham, said a full report on the 1946-1948 Guatemala situation should be released in the coming months.

"To date, we have reviewed 477 boxes of materials, hundreds of thousands of pages of documents, and we anticipate that we will review hundreds of boxes more," said Bonham.

"The investigation will proceed where the evidence leads," she added.

"We began this work just eight short weeks ago. It is my hope and expectation that you will have the report at the beginning of the summer."

Obama personally apologized to Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom in October before ordering a thorough review of what happened, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the experiments as "clearly unethical."

The Guatemalan study, which was never published, came to light in 2010 after Wellesley College professor Susan Reverby stumbled upon archived documents outlining the experiment led by controversial US doctor John Cutler.

Cutler and his fellow researchers enrolled 1,500 people in Guatemala, including mental patients, for the study, which aimed to find out if penicillin could be used to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Initially, the researchers infected female Guatemalan commercial sex workers with gonorrhea or syphilis, and then allowed them to have unprotected sex with soldiers or prison inmates.

Cutler was also involved in a highly controversial study known as the Tuskegee Experiment in which hundreds of African-American men with late-stage syphilis were observed but given no treatment between 1932 and 1972.

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