

Between Accommodation and Confrontation —Eunice Rivers and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study

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Abstract

The story of the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male was broken in 1972 by Associated Press reporter Jean Heller, resulting in a public uproar. Eunice Rivers, a nurse, was the only person associated with the study to have worked on it consistently for its entire forty-year span. Historians have evaluated her role in very different ways. In this article, I discuss the role she played in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study with a view to the provision of medical care during the era of segregation in America to explain why Rivers insisted that she acted correctly. First, I will show that Rivers' position within the study changed in increments during those forty years due to changes in personnel. Those changes led to her acquiring a degree of authority behind the scenes, such that she became an irreplaceable part of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Her changing position was internalized, resulting in attitudinal changes. Through face-to-face encounters, Rivers was aware of the community's needs, and knew what she could provide in terms of medical care. She provided the men who trusted her with medical directions, instead of prescriptions, and thus sought to remain true to the Nightingale Pledge by making use of the advantages that came from her long-experience in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Viewed in this way, Rivers was not shrewd, as many historians have described her, but simply motivated to cast her role in this complex study in the best possible light.

Key Words: Eunice Rivers, Tuskegee Syphilis Study, Macon County