



**THOMAS PARRAN:  
HIS CAREER, HIS NAME,  
AND HIS LEGACY—  
A SYMPOSIUM**

THURSDAY, 3/29/2018

2:30–4:45 PM

UNIVERSITY CLUB

BALLROOM A



As U.S. Surgeon General from 1936-1948, Thomas Parran was one of the most important and effective progressive voices in public health in the first half of the 20th century, yet his legacy is marred by unethical venereal disease studies that were conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service under his leadership. Upon retirement from the Public Health Service in 1948, Parran became the founding dean of the Graduate School of Public Health. The main building of the school was named after him.

In January of this year, Pitt Public Health's Dean Donald S. Burke requested that the University convene a review committee to evaluate whether the name Parran Hall is consistent with the University's mission. A review committee has been formed through the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and is to report its recommendations on this issue to the chancellor in about 60 days.

Today's symposium invites our school community to learn about the conflicted legacy of Thomas Parran. The program features four speakers who have expertise on him, on the Tuskegee and Guatemala syphilis studies, and on cultural issues around monuments and naming.

## AGENDA

### **2:30 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

#### **"Thomas Parran: An Overview of His Career"**

Gregory J. Dober

#### **"Escaping Melodrama: What do we do about the 'bad' men in the studies in Tuskegee and Guatemala?"**

Susan Reverby

#### **"Lessons from the History of the U.S. Public Health Service Research Studies in Tuskegee and Guatemala"**

Bill Jenkins

#### **"The Roles of Monuments and Naming in Collective Memory and Identity"**

Kirk Savage

### **3:15 DISCUSSION AMONG THE SPEAKERS**

Gregory J. Dober, moderator

### **3:45 AUDIENCE QUESTIONS FOR THE SPEAKERS**

## SPEAKER BIOS

**GREGORY J. DOBER** is a medical writer, health care ethics advocate, and adjunct professor in biomedical ethics at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine

Dober co-authored *Against Their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation on Children in Cold War America* (2013) with Allen Hornblum and Judith Newman. While researching for that book, Dober discovered files at the University of Pittsburgh implicating former U.S. Surgeon General Thomas Parran Jr., as the intellectual inspiration of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study. According to his co-authors, "A significant stash of important documents totaling over 75 linear feet, they not only help us understand medical research during the last century and Parran's zeal for conquering various social diseases, but also how U.S. Public Health Service physicians could have annually examined hundreds of impoverished, syphilitic Alabama sharecroppers but never actually treat them."

These discoveries have since been cited in various media, including a critical July 2017 viewpoint in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Should Pitt cut ties with doctor linked to racist Tuskegee experiment?"

Dober obtained graduate degrees in bioethics and health care ethics from Loyola University-Chicago and Duquesne University.

**SUSAN M. REVERBY** is an historian of American health care, women, race, and public health with a focus on equality and ethics. She is the Marion Butler McLean Professor Emerita in the History of Ideas, professor emerita of women's and gender studies at Wellesley College, and a visiting scholar in the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University.

For two decades Reverby was an historian of the infamous "Tuskegee" syphilis study, the four decades long (1932–72) U.S. Public Health Service research study in which African American men were deceived into believing they were being treated, not monitored, for their disease. She edited a book on this study called *Tuskegee's Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study* (2000) and wrote *Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and Its Legacy* (2009), which won three major academic awards, including the APHA's Viseltear Prize and Phi Beta Kappa's Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize. She was also part of the legacy committee that led to President Clinton offering a federal apology for this study in 1997. As part of her research, Reverby found unpublished papers about a U.S. Public Health Service study (1946–48) in Guatemala in the Pitt archives that involved infecting men and women in a prison, army barracks, and mental hospital with sexually transmitted diseases. Sharing her findings with the CDC, this work became the basis for the U.S. government's apology to the people of Guatemala, a focus on the study by the president's Bioethical Issues Commission, and the reassessment of the protections we give to subjects, especially in studies that take place outside the U.S. borders.

Her newest manuscript is a biography tentatively entitled, *Practicing Solidarity: An American Physician's Unusual Journey through Revolution, Prison, Cancer and Global Health Activism*. It is about Alan Berkman (1945–2009), a global health physician who fought to get anti-retrovirals for HIV/AIDs into Global South countries and changed American policy. But he was previously also described by the U.S. government as a "terrorist," was doing clandestine bombings in the mid 1980s, was caught, served eight years as political prisoner in some of our worst prisons, and survived five rounds of cancers, until he did not.

Reverby received a BS degree in industrial and labor relations/labor history from Cornell University

in 1967, an MA in American civilization from New York University in 1973, and a PhD in American studies from Boston University in 1982.

**BILL JENKINS** is a biostatistician and epidemiologist who helped end the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study during his years at the CDC and later managed a benefits program for study survivors. Today, Jenkins works to expand opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities and to eliminate disparities.

Jenkins has served as CEO at Community Health Analytics and held academic appointments at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Morehouse School of Medicine where he instructed medical, graduate, and undergraduate students in biostatistics, epidemiology, and public health. For two decades he was supervisory epidemiologist in the CDC's National Center for HIV, STD, and TB Prevention and managed its Minority Health Activities Program and the Participant Health Benefits Program, which assures medical services to the survivors of the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male. Jenkins served as an expert on minority issues in disease transmission, as chief of the Research and Evaluation Statistics Section in the Division of Sexually Transmitted Diseases Prevention, and as manager of the National Minority Organizations HIV Prevention Program.

Jenkins obtained his bachelor's degree in mathematics from Morehouse College. He holds a master's degree in biostatistics from Georgetown University, and both a MPH degree and a DrPH degree in epidemiology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also has completed post-doctoral work in biostatistics at Harvard University T. H. Chan School of Public Health. He is a member of the American College of Epidemiology (ACE), the American Statistical Association (ASA), and the American Public Health Association, where he served on the governing council and executive board. He was the chair of the epidemiology section of ASA, and a member of the board of directors of ACE.

**KIRK SAVAGE** is a specialist in the art of the United States. He holds the William S. Dietrich II Chair and is a professor in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh.

Savage has written extensively on public monuments within the larger theoretical context of collective memory and identity. He has criticized the "policies of willful amnesia" at his alma mater and universities across the country, as they struggle with protests and criticisms about ongoing institutional racism, and challenges them "to teach these issues, to create spaces where people can air disagreements and still listen to one another, and to work toward a better dialogue." He is the author of two prizewinning books. *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (2009) reconsidered the key public monuments and spaces of the capital within a narrative of nation building, spatial conquest, ecological destructiveness, and psychological trauma. *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) investigated the themes of slavery and emancipation in the monument boom that followed the U.S. Civil War. He is at work on a new book about the Civil War dead that examines the interaction of bodies, names, and memorials. A digital humanities component will focus on the movement of the war dead through local and national space and the visualization of that mobile identity in the ground of a soldier cemetery.

Savage holds a PhD in art history from the University of California—Berkeley, and a BA in math and philosophy from Yale University.

## DEANS LETTER



# University of Pittsburgh

## *Graduate School of Public Health*

### *Office of the Dean*

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January 8, 2018

Pamela W. Connelly, JD  
Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion  
University of Pittsburgh  
Room 540 Craig Hall  
200 South Craig Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Subject: Concern regarding the name of Parran Hall

Dear Dr. Connelly:

The main building of the Graduate School of Public Health is "Parran Hall," named after our founding dean and former U.S. Surgeon General Thomas Parran. I write to request that the Office of Diversity and Inclusion form a review committee to consider whether the name "Parran Hall" is consistent with the University's mission to create a diverse and inclusive environment. Concerns have been raised both locally and nationally about Parran's legacy.

Parran began his career in the United States Public Health Service in 1917, working in rural health administration and sanitation. In 1926 he became the chief of the Division of Venereal Diseases. He was a leading figure among public health progressives of the time, working to remove the stigma from venereal diseases and treat syphilis as a medical condition rather than a moral one [Parran 1937]. In 1930, Franklin Roosevelt brought Parran to the state of New York, where he set up the state's local and public health system. Parran also played an active role in the drafting of the Social Security Act and in the founding of the World Health Organization, all while continuing his crusade to make it socially acceptable to treat and control venereal disease. Roosevelt eventually brought Parran back to the Public Health Service, where he served as the surgeon general of the United States from 1936 to 1948. Parran was a committed advocate of universal access to health care, developing much of the anticipated infrastructure for a national health insurance program before it became politically unachievable and was dropped. That advocacy in the face of political opposition led at least in part to Parran's departure from the federal government. In 1948 he retired from the Public Health Service and became our founding dean.

It is indisputable that Parran was one of the most important and effective progressive voices in public health in the first half of the 20th century. The concerning aspects of Parran's legacy, however, revolve around his role in venereal disease studies that were conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service under his leadership as surgeon general.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study began in 1932, a partnership between the Public Health Service and Tuskegee University, a historically black college in Alabama [Jones 1992, Gray 2002, Reverby 2009]. Investigators enrolled approximately 600 extremely poor African-American sharecroppers, of whom about two thirds already had syphilis. The goal of the study was to

understand the natural history (natural course) of syphilis infection. The men were given free meals and medical care, but were never told they were infected, never treated, and never asked to give informed consent to any procedure. Over the early years of the study, there were several junctures at which study leaders actively prevented the men from finding out about treatment programs that might have been available to them. The most critical point in the study came in the late 1940s when penicillin became the effective and standard treatment, yet the men remained untreated and uninformed. The study did not end until 1972, by which point the victims included numerous men who had died of syphilis, 40 wives who contracted it, and 19 children born with it. The Tuskegee Study is considered, with good reason, to be one of the most notorious violations of human rights in medical research in U.S. history. Last year papers were found in the collection of Parran's documents showing that he was more than a distant government bystander in the Tuskegee experiments, suggesting that he had been directly involved in the design of the studies. This unpublished manuscript of Parran's role in Tuskegee received wide public attention when it became the subject of an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer last year [Dober 2017, Bender 2017].

The other unethical human studies in which Parran had at least some level of responsibility were the syphilis studies conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service in Guatemala from 1946 to 1948 [Reverby 2011, Reverby 2014]. Records of the experiments were discovered by professor Susan Reverby of Wellesley College among the papers of John C. Cutler in the University of Pittsburgh Archives. After Cutler retired from the Public Health Service (PHS), he joined the faculty of the Graduate School of Public Health. When he subsequently retired from the University, he left his papers from his time in the PHS as well as from his time at Pitt to the University Archives. In the Cutler syphilis studies, soldiers, prostitutes, prisoners, and mental patients in Guatemala were intentionally infected with syphilis and other venereal diseases. There was no informed consent, though some or most patients were subsequently treated with antibiotics. The findings prompted a formal apology from President Obama to the government of Guatemala. A Presidential Commission report on the study [2011] described the research as "unconscionable basic violations of ethics, even as judged against the researchers' own recognition of the requirements Re: Parran Hall January 8, 2018, page 3 of the medical ethics of the day." Parran was Public Health Service surgeon general at the time of the Guatemala studies, and records indicate that he was fully aware of them.

Parran's legacy has been a concern to us at the Graduate School of Public Health for some time. Not long after the revelations about the Guatemala syphilis studies came to light, we held a school-wide "town hall" meeting (24 March 2011) to openly discuss the historical facts and the lessons learned. Now, in the wake of the renewed concerns about Parran's role in the Tuskegee studies, we are planning another open town hall meeting (tentatively scheduled for 20 April 2018).

I now request that the University of Pittsburgh consider whether it is consistent with its mission to have the main Graduate School of Public Health building named for Thomas Parran.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Donald S. Burke  
Distinguished University Professor of Health Science and Policy  
UPMC-Jonas Salk Professor of Global Health  
Dean, Graduate School of Public Health

cc: Arthur S. Levine  
Senior Vice Chancellor for the Health Sciences

## REFERENCES

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Information about the committee membership and process can be found at [www.diversity.pitt.edu/diversity-resources/parran-hall-review](http://www.diversity.pitt.edu/diversity-resources/parran-hall-review).

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