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Spring 2018 Second Prize Essay

UNEXPECTED OUTCOME OF UNETHICAL EXPERIMENTATION

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During World War II, Germany was a rapidly growing society under the dictatorship of the Nazi party. In order to advance their military power and medical knowledge, the Nazis performed cruel medical experiments on prisoners in concentration camps and disabled people in asylums. These experiments included testing the human endurance in extreme conditions, sterilization, and euthanasia. The victims of these experiments suffered from extreme physical and emotional trauma due to the brutality of the procedures. After the war ended, the Nuremberg trials were held to prosecute the physicians who committed these heinous crimes. The Nuremberg Code was produced as a result of the trials that took place after these experiments to protect subjects of medical experimentation in the future. Although the Holocaust was an extremely traumatic event that affected the lives of many people, the Nuremberg Code is one positive outcome because it changed the laws of medical practice to protect future patients from being subject to unethical medical experiments and it developed the principle of autonomy in clinical care.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Germany was a developing society undergoing rapid advancements in science and technology. These advancements, “were also a result of an increasing standardization of medical training that was based on research and state funds being allocated towards health insurance” (Loewenau 421). However, many citizens during this time period, including the disabled and the ‘racially undesirable’ were considered a burden to Germany’s blossoming society. These people were targets for physicians who, “were attracted to the Nazi party by promises that the National Socialists will remove the Jewish predominance from the profession and restore the prestige, honor, and dignity of the Aryan physicians” (Yehuda 139). Without anyone to protect them, these people endured terrible experiments conducted by German physicians in attempt to advance the German military forces. Due to these desires for advancement, “a range of experiments were developed and implemented in concentration camps, using the inmates as research ‘guinea pigs,’ as well as in psychiatric clinics where patients were subjected to dreadful tests of drugs and vaccines” (Loewenau 423). Tests such as these left victims physically and psychologically scarred from the torture. The two major crimes of the German physicians during this time period were “the participation of physicians in euthanasia and genocide and the horrible experiments performed on concentration camp prisoners in the name of science” (Jotkowitz 869). Euthanasia and unethical experiments were the two major crimes of German physicians because they violated the Hippocratic oath that these physicians took, promising to help people. These physicians subjected people to be victims of many heinous experiments to advance military abilities, such as testing poison, new drugs, and the limits of human endurance.

The physicians who performed these experiments argued that they were necessary for military advancement and defense. Their experiments fell into the two categories of, “survival and rescue projects that tested human potential for survival under extreme conditions . . . the second category of experiments was conducted to provide biological scientific evidence to substantiate the Nazi racist ideology” (Yehuda 140). However, their experiments were incredibly unethical and harmful to the victims. The survival and rescue experiments often put victims into treacherous situations to test their endurance. For example, experiments with low pressure were, “intended to simulate sudden pressure drops in pilot cabins when

airplanes had been shot down – were often conducted to the point of death for the test persons whose brains were later collected and pathologically examined” (Loewenau 425). Other experiments related to these tested “the results of starvation on the human body . . . His starving victims were put to death by intracardiac phenol injection and dissected” (Yehuda 140). These victims suffered slow and painful deaths, starving for days until they were finally killed and studied. One prisoner describes the experiment that he endured and states that:

I was taken by a doctor and placed in a chair, and the doctors started strapping my hands and arms to the chair . . . The doctors started pumping what they said was water into my bladder . . . I was feeling very uncomfortable and they started hurting me. I don't think they were succeeding in what they wanted to do. For the next week, whenever I answered nature's call I urinated blood. All the fifty or sixty men next to me underwent the same thing. I daresay it was an experiment (Smith 228).

The physical and mental effects of experiments such as these caused extensive suffering for victims. The second category of experiments that substantiated the Nazi racist ideology involved the euthanasia of different people and the studying of their brains to 'prove' that they were inferior to the Aryan race. Special departments received “blood, tissue samples, skeletons, and even amputated heads of victims” (Yehuda 140) that they used for comparative research. Experiments such as these killed many victims in an endless supply of patients, due to the lack of ethical boundaries held by German physicians.

Another type of medical experiment that victims endured were forced sterilizations. Physicians experimented with ways to sterilize as many people as possible in the shortest amount of time in order to expand the Aryan race and rid the population of people that were deemed as worthless members of society. One of the sterilization techniques used was called 'sterilization by X-ray.' During this treatment, “men, women, and children were exposed to high doses of pelvic radiation. Many developed severe radiation burns. Following the X-ray exposure, the victims frequently underwent surgical castration” (Yehuda 141). This method of sterilization was extremely traumatizing both physically and emotionally. Another method of sterilization included injections of chemicals into the fallopian tubes. During these injections, women “experienced pain that led to fainting or had to be treated with morphine. They had long-lasting labor-like painful contractions, developed vaginal discharge, bleeding, and pelvic inflammatory disease” (Hildebrandt 287). These women were unaware that they were being sterilized until after the procedure had already taken place. One survivor of these experiments states that, “the pain after each injection was the same and lasted for several days. I still have this pain today . . . I have not been able to have children” (Hildebrandt 288). The women that survived these experiments suffered from physical pain and emotional trauma for the remainder of their lives and left them unable to have children even after being freed from the camps. One of the physicians who performed these sterilizations claimed that “a doctor with 10 assistants could sterilize 1,000 women in 1 day” (Yehuda 141). These numbers could lead to entire populations of people being infertile in just weeks. Mass sterilizations such as these were ideal for the Nazi party to achieve their goal of eliminating certain groups of people from their society.

Euthanasia was another method that Nazis used to rid unwanted people from their society. Adolf Hitler decided to use euthanasia as a method to “cleanse the Third Reich's society from any 'unwanted elements,' specifically meaning the mentally and physically ill” (Loewenau 422). The euthanasia program began with the killing of disabled children, but soon was implemented for disabled adults, as well as people of other races. These extermination efforts, “were carried out with the active cooperation of physicians and nurses, many of whom had participated in the sterilization programs” (Gonzalez-Lopez 257). These nurses and physicians typically selected people from asylums and concentration camps to be killed. Many victims of euthanasia were killed by starvation and lethal doses of drugs or injections. One prisoner describes watching someone be euthanized. He states that the doctor, “opened a little cabinet,

took out an injection tube which held half a litre, opened a bottle of gasoline and filled it. The SS pushed the needle between the prisoner's ribs and pumped the gasoline into the heart. Then the SS waited, tried his pulse and the prisoner was dead . . . on that day he killed about three dozen people" (Smith 227). This method was a quick way to murder unsuspecting people, who believed that they were being seen by the doctor for a simple medical exam. Another quicker, but less common form of euthanasia that they used was shooting. In order to hide or justify their work they "framed in such medical terms as 'healing work' and 'death assistance,' German health practitioners carried out the murder of thousands of the 'unfit'" (Hildebrandt 55). This practice was widely accepted throughout the medical field in Germany and very few German physicians opposed this euthanasia because most viewed it as "being potentially beneficial to their own research agendas since the euthanasia programs guaranteed unlimited research material, such as brain specimens" (Loewenau 423). Physicians killed innocent people for selfish reasons, as well as compliance with the government. Although Hitler ended the euthanasia program in 1941 due to public opposition, 70,000 individuals had already been killed. Although the official program ended, individual physicians continued euthanasia in hospitals and asylums until the end of the war. (Kessler 12). Countless innocent people suffered and died at the hands of these physicians, who had taken the Hippocratic Oath to 'do no harm.'

Many different groups of innocent victims were targeted by these German physicians for different reasons. Most of the victims were German, Austrian, or Polish. These victims were much more susceptible to these experiments and were mainly imprisoned in Dachau (Loewenau 427). However, the religion of a majority of the victims from the asylums is difficult to determine because it was not recorded when they were admitted. The gender distribution of the victims of these experiments is mostly even because, "males accounted to 60 percent of all victims, versus female victims, who accounted for 40 percent" (Loewenau 428). Although these experiments were performed on victims of all ages, "the vast majority of the victims . . . were between four and 14" (Loewenau 429). These innocent children were killed by Nazi physicians in order to cleanse their society of people who were considered unwanted or unfit to live. The perpetrators of these experiments fell into a much narrower category. For example, "the number of women who were involved in coerced medical experiments was relatively low at 7 percent, which equaled approximately 18 women for every 243 men" (Loewenau 430). In addition, the perpetrators of these crimes were often much older than the majority of the victims. The physicians who committed these crimes were "approximately 25-60 years of age when they began their subject experiments" (Loewenau 431). Due to the age that they started their experiments, many of these physicians continued their lives after the Holocaust. Out of all of the physicians that were involved, only 28% of them stood trial, and a shocking 62% of them were not prosecuted. (Loewenau 434). A broad array of people were victims or perpetrators of these medical experiments, but certain demographics, such as German, Austrian, and Polish youth were more susceptible than others.

After World War II ended, the world responded with sympathy for the victims of these atrocities. They desired to protect and assist the victims for the trauma that they had suffered. The two main ethical responses to these crimes were "the protection of research subjects and the paradigm shift from paternalism to autonomy" (Jotkowitz 101). In attempt to protect the victims of these experiments, the world took a paternalistic approach and prevented survivors from healing in their own ways. However, a shift from paternalism to autonomy took place and allowed the victims to take control of their own lives again and seek help as they needed. Also in response to these crimes, was the Nuremberg military tribunal, which was held to punish the physicians who participated in these procedures. Out of this trial, the Nuremberg code was established as, "one of the first significant human rights documents" (Jotkowitz 869). During these trials, "twenty-three Nazi physicians and administrators were accused of organizing and participat-

ing in war crimes and crimes against humanity by way of medical experiments and procedures to which prisoners and civilians were subjected unnecessarily, and prosecuted between 1946 and 1947” (Nelson 101). However, only sixteen of these defendants were convicted, while seven defendants were acquitted. The defendants were indicted on these four specific counts of “conspiracy to commit war crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and membership in a criminal organization” (Nelson 101). Although the physicians tried to justify their experiments by claiming that they were necessary for German warfare, this argument did not prevail at trial. The descriptions given during this trial “detailed the horrific nature of the research conducted primarily on Nazi concentration camp inmates” (Nelson 101). The most beneficial part of the Nuremberg trials, was the establishment of the Nuremberg Code, which “established ten principles of ethical conduct in medical research . . . Foremost among them was the need for voluntary consent of the human subject and that the experiment be conducted to avoid all unnecessary physical and mental suffering” (Jotkowitz 869). This code set boundaries for all future medical experiments in attempt to protect people from being subjects of unethical human experimentation again. It is also considered the “marker of the birth of American bioethics and has shaped the development of human research protections in the ensuing decades” (Nelson 103). This reiterates how influential the code has been for modern medicine in protecting patients and ensuring ethical clinical research. It benefited the medical field by developing the ethical principle of ‘voluntary consent’ and extending it to clinical care. The Nuremberg Code also made autonomy, “the guiding principle of modern medical practice” (Jotkowitz 869). Health care practice in the future will benefit from this code by ensuring that patient treatment is ethical and patient autonomy and consent is valued. The Nuremberg Code already prevented unethical experimentation twice when it, “intersected both the sexually transmitted disease study in Guatemala and the Tuskegee syphilis study” (Nelson 103). This code has already protected people and will continue to protect patients in the future. Although the victims of these experiments suffered enormously, the Nuremberg Code impacted the medical field in a positive way because it prevents tragedies like this from occurring in the future. It also developed the code of ethics that are still used in clinical practice today to protect patients from unethical experimentation.

Although prisoners in the concentration camps suffered great physical and psychological trauma at the hands of physicians, they did not suffer in vain because the Nuremberg trials led to one positive outcome of the Holocaust, the Nuremberg Code. This code protects patients in the future from enduring what victims of the Holocaust suffered, such as unethical experimentation on human subjections, forced sterilizations, and euthanasia. It creates a guide for health care professionals to follow in their practice in order to protect future patients from suffering the trauma that victims of the Holocaust endured. It also developed and protected the patient’s right to informed consent and autonomy. The Nuremberg Code has already intersected two unethical human research studies that have taken place and will continue to do so in the future. Despite the terrible conditions that led to it, the Nuremberg Code will continue to protect participants in research studies in the future to ensure that they never have to endure the treatment that victims of the Holocaust medical experiments faced. Patients in the future can feel safer knowing that the Nuremberg Code will protect them from unethical treatment by physicians.

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