

# Tuskegee study frames medical ethics discussion

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A panel discussion about the infamous Tuskegee scandal, portrayed in a 1992 movie screened on Tuesday (Nov. 8) on the uptown campus, continued the dialogue about bioethics in modern medicine, which is the theme of this year's Tulane Reading Project.



A doctor draws blood from one of the Tuskegee subjects in the controversial medical research project, which took place from the 1930s to the 1970s. (Photo from Wikipedia)

The [film](#) about the Tuskegee project that began in the 1930s explores how syphilis treatment was deceptively withheld from a group of rural black men in a study of the progression of the disease.

The panel of experts predominantly focused on the principle of informed consent as a paramount safeguard against possible abuse.

“The doctor must make sure,” said the Rev. Donald Owens Jr., chaplain for the Tulane School of Medicine, “not only that they say the appropriate words, but that a layman can actually understand what's being said and its implications.”

Susan Krinsky, a Tulane Law School assistant dean with bioethics experience, acknowledged that the potential for abuse always would exist. Anytime there's a knowledge imbalance, she said, there is the potential for a power imbalance that can be abused.

Despite that fact, responded Dr. Hans Andersson, director of the Hayward Genetics Center at Tulane, "The culture of the medical school toward ethics has shifted completely ... It used to be, we'd hear 'Do No Harm,' but now we teach ethics every year, and emphasize its importance. It's much less likely that systematic abuse would occur today."

During an impassioned question-and-answer period, one audience member asked whether violation of informed consent could ever be justified.

Silence fell over the room for several weighty moments. "No," said Owens, simply. "Whatever the circumstances, these are people with dreams and hopes and fears, and we in the medical profession must always remember that."

The film and panel discussion were part of a series of events surrounding the [Reading Project](#).

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