

# Letter to the Editor

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To the Editor,

Lana Tennenhouse's article, *A Star Trek Exploration into the Usage of Data Obtained from Unethical Medical Experiments*, is a stellar comparison of science fiction and real-world events that highlights the dilemma of what to do with the products of unethical medical experimentation. We do not, however, need to look as far afield as Nazi Germany or futuristic universes to find examples of unethical medical experimentation and its consequences.

In the 1950s and 1960s at McGill's Allan Memorial Institute, Dr. D. Ewen Cameron experimented on patients with mental illness. His work caught the attention of, and was then secretly funded by, the CIA; the agency was covertly supporting research in behavioural modification in the service of American geopolitical interests.<sup>1</sup> Cameron's theory of "psychic driving" proposed that patients with mental illness could be cured by erasing their memories and then rebuilding their psyches. The CIA was interested in Dr. Cameron's theory that patients in an "amnesic state" were hypersensitive to suggestion — in other words, they could be brainwashed. The experimental treatment included intensive electroshock therapy, chemical agents (including LSD), sensory deprivation and extended drug-induced comas. Many patients never recovered from the effects of treatment. Most were never informed about its experimental nature, or the potential side effects.

The results of Dr. Cameron's experiments were published in prominent medical journals and presented at international conferences, without critique.<sup>2,3</sup> In fact, he was recognized and rewarded for his contributions, being elected president of the Canadian, American and World Psychiatric Associations. The patients, their families, and the Canadian public were not aware of the unethical experimentation, or its funding source, until the 1980s when several families came forward and journalists began to ask questions.<sup>4</sup>

There are grim similarities between the experiments at McGill and the Tuskegee syphilis study. Both involved vulnerable populations, unable to advocate for themselves. Data from both projects were presented at conferences and published in reputable journals, giving

validation to the experimental methods and results. It was only when the nature of the experiments became known beyond the psychiatric fraternity, that public outrage led to changes in research ethics guidelines and practice. If the exposure of medical malfeasance led to public distrust of the medical community, it is hard to argue that, in these cases, it was a bad thing.

Unlike the *Star Trek: Voyager* episode there were no positive therapeutic insights gained from the psychic driving experiments. CIA interrogators may be the only ones still interested in Dr. Cameron's experimental data.

## References

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- [4] A Clarkson. MK Ultra. *The Fifth Estate*: CBC, 1980.

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