

### **Parran Hall Position Statement**

The University Senate's Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination Advocacy Committee (EIADAC) is concerned that a University building continues to bear the name of Dr. Thomas Parran. A noted physician and Public Health Service officer, Parran was appointed the sixth Surgeon General of the United States from 1936 to 1948. During that time, Parran was aware<sup>1</sup> of the notorious Tuskegee and Guatemala syphilis experiments,<sup>2</sup> conducted by Dr. John C. Cutler, which examined the long-term health impact of syphilitic infection by following the natural progression of the disease in already infected rural African-American men in Alabama and by deliberately infecting healthy, yet vulnerable populations in Guatemala (i.e., prisoners, sex workers, soldiers, children, and psychiatric patients) with the disease without their knowledge and consent. The study went on in the United States and in Guatemala long after the discovery of penicillin as an efficacious cure for syphilis, and study subjects-were led to believe that they were receiving medical treatment when they, in fact, were not. Historian Susan Reverby, in reviewing Cutler's files discovered the following: "Malaria specialist G. Robert Coatney, who had done prison malaria studies, visited the project in February 1947. In reporting to Cutler after he returned to the States, he explained that he had brought Surgeon General Thomas Parran up to date and that with a "merry twinkle [that] came into his eye ... [he] said 'You know, we couldn't do such an experiment in this country.'" Such conduct should not be glorified and is contrary to Pitt's valiant mission.

In addition, the historical trauma of the unethical study continues to negatively impact the health of African Americans as many view the arguable ethics involved in this work as a reason to question or avoid health care. In addition, clinical and biomedical researchers continue to struggle to diversify the clinical research participant pool, limiting chances to find cures to illnesses, particularly among minorities. While arguments have been made that the study was conducted according to the research ethics of the day, it certainly ran counter to the physician's dictate to "first do no harm."

Today, many US institutions (including our peer and aspirational institutions) are examining the names they have placed on buildings according to historical context. Names of slave owners are being removed from edifices in recognition of the human rights abuses that have been linked to individuals who donated to endowments or funded construction. It is a dark history that many have recognized and they have, in turn, taken necessary action.

As Dr. Parran's historically significant papers are located at the University of Pittsburgh, EIADAC recommends that Dr. Thomas Parran's name be removed from the Graduate School of Public Health building, and an internal display of his work be created, such that his imprint not be erased, but recognized within the context of the impact it made on the study participants, as well as the impact it continues to make in the lives of minorities today.

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<sup>1</sup> "Normal Exposure" and Inoculation Syphilis: A PHS "Tuskegee" Doctor in Guatemala, 1946-1948, Susan M. Reverby

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/1946inoculationstudy/factsheet.html>