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Sentenced to Science: One Black Man's Story of Imprisonment in America

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Sentenced to Science: One Black Man's Story of Imprisonment in America by Allen Hornblum was published in 2007 by The Pennsylvania State University Press. This 200-page paperback chronicles the wide spectrum of abusive medical experimentation endured by Edward Anthony during his time at Philadelphia's Holmesburg Prison in the 1960s. It further recounts the experimentation of the infamous Dr. Albert Kligman between the 1950s and 1970s.

Blending firsthand testimony by Edward "Yusuf" Anthony with the author's voice, which provides contextualization and perspective, *Sentenced to Science* provides an important account of abuses in the name of scientific and medical discovery, with telling insight regarding informed consent and our criminal justice system. Hornblum is a Philadelphia-based author, journalist, former criminal justice official, and political organizer. He has written eight nonfiction books, and lectures at Temple and Drexel universities and to audiences of medical scholars and laypeople alike.

Hornblum writes that Kligman, who was invited to Holmesburg Prison in 1951 to treat an outbreak of athlete's foot, gained exclusive experimental use of inmate bodies through the 1950s and 1960s. He tested 153 experimental drugs between 1962 and 1966 alone. Through his research on prisoners, Kligman — a University of Pennsylvania dermatologist — became well known for developing Retin-A to treat acne, and for contributing to breakthroughs in dermatology in

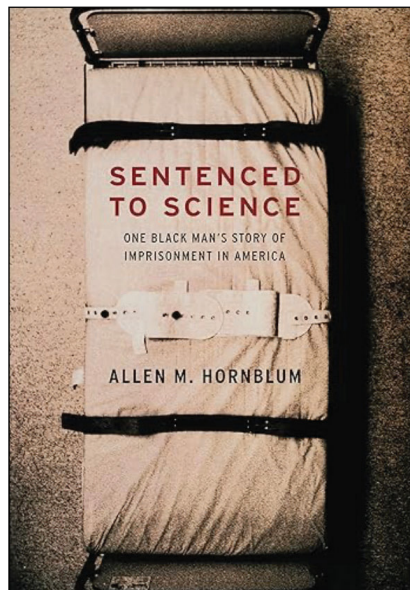
the areas of seborrheic dermatitis, ringworm, and alopecia.

Holmesburg Prison — nicknamed the "Terror-dome" — was operated by the City of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Department of Prisons from 1896 to 1995, when it was decommissioned. It was the site of decades-long dermatologic, pharmaceutical, and biochemical weapons research conducted on prisoners for at least 35 major companies.

As most researchers are now aware, we must study our history. Reading about and understanding the Nuremberg Code (10 points that guide medical experimentation that resulted from the Nuremberg Trial after World War II) and the *Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research* provide an introduction for reflection on the principles of medical ethics — specifically: autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. The accounts of events at Holmesburg Prison during the 1960s add homegrown background for clinicians and researchers participating in human trials or obtaining

informed consent in any setting.

Sentenced to Science, like the latter texts, can leave medical students and practicing physicians challenged, reflective, and cogitabund. A gut-wrenching yet elucidative account of medical experimentation done in Northeast Philadelphia from 1951-1974, this book centers the narrative of Edward "Yusuf" Anthony, who recounts his experiences as the subject of medical testing while incarcerated.



By Allen M. Hornblum,
University Park, Penn State Univ. Press, 2013,
232 p, 26.95 paperback

BOOK SUMMARY

Early chapters paint the scene of Anthony's upbringing and changes in the population in the Strawberry Mansion section of North Philadelphia, where he was raised, throughout the end of the 1950s. On page 15, Hornblum writes:

As a child growing up in the heart of the jungle, Eddie Anthony was understandably ignorant of the shifting demographics and changing socioeconomic fortunes affecting his community. The flight of white residents to Northeast Philadelphia and the suburbs and the gradual demise of the area's industrial base were beyond his comprehension.

He recounts wanting to break away from the strict upbringing of his Baptist parents, more identifying with "guys who were cool and doing cool things."

By the time he was 16 or 17 years old, Anthony was cutting school, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol as well as cough syrup with codeine, and had become addicted to heroin. It wasn't long before he ended up in prison, and he would spend much of his adult life in and out of incarceration. Shortly after arriving at Holmesburg Prison, Anthony's experience with unethical medical experimentation began.

Anthony entered Holmesburg Prison in 1964. He quickly learned that the people wearing white coats, explaining the studies, and obtaining his consent were not physicians but fellow inmates. When he and others developed complications from the studies, they were unable to access medical evaluation, treatment, or care. Over the course of 16 chapters, the author, through Anthony's words, tells of Anthony's time at Holmesburg Prison during the mid-1960s, during which he participated in several studies and suffered many complications. At that time, men who were incarcerated were frequently subjected to phase 1 drug trials, including exposure to detergents and applications of agents such as dioxin to the skin.

Anthony relates that days after arriving, he enrolled in a study meant to determine if Johnson & Johnson bubble bath was harmful to someone with open wounds. Participating in a study seemed like an easy way to pass the time during his prison stay and earn \$37 over the course of three weeks. Yet he soon came to regret his consent, as researchers removed his skin, layer by layer, by placing adhesive tape on his back and then ripping it away, again and again, in the same spot.

Next, a solution was applied to these areas with gauze secured with tape; alcohol-based spray was then

applied. Knowing he would only be paid if he withstood the entire test, he had no choice but to allow this process to be repeated daily for weeks. He explains:

It was like something was crawling under my skin. Under my arms and between my legs it's getting real hot. I'm moaning. My cell mates can't do anything for me, and I'm keeping them from getting any sleep at night. I'm thinking the whole time, what the hell did I get myself into? I'm blaming my cell partners, the damn doctors, myself, I don't know who to blame.

Anthony recounts his recovery from this experiment and subsequent enrollment in others, from which he developed many complications. From back-room hemorrhoid treatment without follow-up care to developing such frightening physical effects from "treatments" that he scared fellow inmates and found himself sent to solitary confinement, it is a harrowing account. He was eventually hospitalized in Philadelphia, found Islam, and although he was in and out of prison for most of his adult life, he finally ended a state prison term that marked the end of his journey with illicit drugs and corrections facilities.

The final chapter of *Sentenced to Science* recounts how the unethical experimentation at Holmesburg Prison came to light and what happened in the immediate aftermath. Interestingly, knowledge of the abuses first became widespread due to reports in Hornblum's book *Acres of Skin*, which detailed Kligman's gruesome work. The book itself was a sensation when it was published in 1998, yet many former prisoners were caught off guard.

So it was for Edward Anthony, who, in the Spring of 1998, heard details of his life story being described, along with those of other Holmesburg Prison victims, on the six o'clock news. Survivors of the Holmesburg experiments began to meet for discussion and eventually organized to bring suit against the City of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania. Responses by Dr. Kligman included comments that his research "was in keeping with the nation's standard protocol for conducting scientific research at that time."¹

Sadly, the suit did not result in restitution or remuneration to the victims. The statute of limitations had passed, and the burden of proving the long-term effects these men faced proved to be too high. Victims were never compensated. Even though Anthony suffers anxiety associated with public speaking, he has subsequently shared his experiences with medical students

and other learners, through the coordination of the author. It is unclear whether or how he has been paid for this work.

As with all coauthored texts, readers should be cautious about the framing of the story and the influence of the journalist's own experiences and background. Nevertheless, readers will empathize with not only Anthony's self-discovery, but how America's eyes were opened when the curtains were drawn back to reveal the horrors of Holmesburg Prison.

The United States has an incarceration rate up to 10 times higher than countries like Canada, France,

and the U.K.; in fact, we have the highest rate in the world.² These are our brothers and sisters. Yet the United States is the only democracy in the world that still does not have an independent authority to monitor the conditions, health, and safety of our prisons and their inhabitants.

By reading *Sentenced to Science: One Black Man's Story of Imprisonment in America*, medical professionals everywhere will gain new perspective on the nuances of informed consent, as well as how collective experience can contribute to community distrust of establishment and medical institutions.

RESOURCE LIST FOR CONTINUED LEARNING

Video about *Sentenced to Science*

<https://english.news.cn/northamerica/20230208/540e8eb200104b46b40d6e531db73900/c.html>

Edward Anthony's Testimony before Congress

https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/TR/Transcripts/1999_0118_0011_TSTMNY.pdf

The Problem with Race-Based Medicine, Dorothy Roberts

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxLMjn4WPBY>

Medical Apartheid

by Harriet Washington

Carte Blanche: The Erosion of Medical Consent

by Harriet Washington

Killing the Black Body

by Dorothy Roberts

Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination

by Alondra Nelson

Fatal Invention

by Dorothy Roberts

REFERENCES

1. Lowe H. Used in lab tests, ex-inmates at Holmesburg call for justice. *Philadelphia Inquirer*. September 29, 1998:1.
2. Prisoners' Rights. ACLU. Accessed October 12, 2023. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/prisoners-rights>

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