
Summary of Research Ethics Milestones

A Short History of the Development of Protections for People Who Participate in Research

1. Nazi Experimentation (early 1940s)

Doctors in Nazi concentration camps forced prisoners to take part in dangerous experiments. Examples of unethical experiments were forcing prisoners to be sterilized and be infected with diseases.

2. Nuremberg “Doctors Trial” (1946-1947)

A U.S. military court in Nuremberg, Germany, charged 23 Nazi doctors and officials with war crimes, including unethical medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners. Sixteen Nazis were executed or sent to prison.

3. Nuremberg Code (1947)

After the Nuremberg Doctors Trial, the judges listed important principles of acceptable medical experiments. These principles became known as the Nuremberg Code. Important principles are:

- Research participation must be voluntary.
- Research studies cannot put people at high risk of disability or death.
- Participants can quit a study at any time.

4. Willowbrook Study (1963-1966)

Willowbrook was a home for children with mental disabilities in New York City. Researchers deliberately injected children with hepatitis to learn about the disease.

5. Declaration of Helsinki (1964)

The World Medical Association, meeting in Helsinki, Finland, approved principles for ethical research. Important principles are:

- Research plans should be reviewed by an independent committee, such as an Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- Research participants must give their “informed consent” to be in a study.
- Risks of being in a study should not outweigh benefits.

6. Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Ended 1972)

Starting in 1932, doctors from the U.S. Public Health Service studied African-American men in Alabama with syphilis. Medications to treat syphilis were available, but doctors wanted to study long-term effects of the disease. Doctors did not give men the medications they needed, and dozens of men died of syphilis or its complications. The study did not end until 1972 when details about it became public.

7. National Research Act (1974)

The act did two major things to stop unethical research on people: 1) It required the U.S. government to create rules to protect people in research studies. 2) It created a national committee to develop guidelines for ethical research. These guidelines are in the Belmont Report.

8. Belmont Report (1979)

The report listed three basic principles for the ethical treatment of people who participate in research:

- Respect
- “Doing good”
- Justice

Examples of the three principles include:

- Respect: People must have a choice about what happens to them.
- “Doing good”: The risks of a study cannot outweigh the possible benefits.
- Justice: The benefits and risks of research should be fairly shared across society.