



The Plutonium Files: America's Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War

By Eileen Welsome

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When the vast wartime factories of the Manhattan Project began producing plutonium in quantities never before seen on earth, scientists working on the top-secret bomb-building program grew apprehensive. Fearful that plutonium might cause a cancer epidemic among workers and desperate to learn more about what it could do to the human body, the Manhattan Project's medical doctors embarked upon an experiment in which eighteen unsuspecting patients in hospital wards throughout the country were secretly injected with the cancer-causing substance. Most of these patients would go to their graves without ever knowing what had been done to them.

Now, in **The Plutonium Files**, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Eileen Welsome reveals for the first time the breadth of the extraordinary fifty-year cover-up surrounding the plutonium injections, as well as the deceitful nature of thousands of other experiments conducted on American citizens in the postwar years.

Welsome's remarkable investigation spans the 1930s to the 1990s and draws upon hundreds of newly declassified documents and other primary sources to disclose this shadowy chapter in American history. She gives a voice to such innocents as Helen Hutchison, a young woman who entered a prenatal clinic in Nashville for a routine checkup and was instead given a radioactive "cocktail" to drink; Gordon Shattuck, one of several boys at a state school for the developmentally disabled in Massachusetts who was fed radioactive oatmeal for breakfast; and Maude Jacobs, a Cincinnati woman suffering from cancer and subjected to an experimental radiation treatment designed to help military planners learn how to win a nuclear war.

Welsome also tells the stories of the scientists themselves, many of whom learned the ways of secrecy on the Manhattan Project. Among them are Stafford Warren, a grand figure whose bravado masked a cunning intelligence; Joseph Hamilton, who felt he was immune to the dangers of radiation only to suffer later from a fatal leukemia; and physician Louis Hempelmann, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the plan to inject humans with potentially carcinogenic doses of plutonium. Hidden discussions of fifty years past are reconstructed here,

wherein trusted government officials debated the ethical and legal implications of the experiments, demolishing forever the argument that these studies took place in a less enlightened era.

Powered by her groundbreaking reportage and singular narrative gifts, Eileen Welsome has created a work of profound humanity as well as major historical significance.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

As World War II reached its climax, the U.S. push to create an atomic bomb spawned an industry the size of General Motors almost overnight. But a little-understood human dilemma quickly arose: How was all the radiation involved in building and testing the bomb going to affect the countless researchers, soldiers, and civilians exposed to it? Government scientists scrambled to find out, fearing cancer outbreaks and worse, but in their urgency conducted classified experiments that bordered on the horrific: MIT researchers fed radioactive oatmeal to residents of a state boys' school outside Boston; prisoners in Washington and Oregon were subjected to crippling blasts of direct radiation; and patients with terminal illnesses (or so it was hoped) were secretly injected with large doses of plutonium--survivors were surreptitiously monitored for years afterward.

It was these plutonium guinea pigs that set journalist Eileen Welsome on her decade-long search to expose this grisly chapter of America's atomic age, a feat that would earn her the Pulitzer Prize. In the impressively thorough and compelling *Plutonium Files*, Welsome recounts her work with a reporter's gift for description, characterizing early radiation researchers as "a curious blend of spook, scientist, and soldier," tirelessly interviewing survivors and their families, and providing social and political context for a complex and far-reaching scandal. Perhaps most damning is that not only did these cold-war experiments violate everything from the Hippocratic Oath to the Nuremberg Code, Welsome reveals, they were often ill-conceived, inconclusive, and repetitive--"they were not just immoral science, they were bad science." --Paul Hughes

From Publishers Weekly

In a deeply shocking and important expos?, Welsome takes the lid off the thousands of secret, government-sponsored radiation experiments performed on unsuspecting human "guinea pigs" at U.S. hospitals, universities and military bases during the Cold War. This riveting report greatly expands on Welsome's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1994 articles in the Albuquerque Tribune, which told how 18 men, women and children scattered in hospital wards across the country were injected with plutonium by U.S. Army and Manhattan Project doctors between 1945 and 1947. As Welsome demonstrates, the scope of the government's radiation experimentation program went much further. She documents how, between 1951 and 1962, the army, navy and air force used military troops in flights through radioactive clouds, "flashblindness" studies and tests to measure radio-isotopes in their body fluids. Additionally, she reveals that cancer patients were subjected to total-body irradiation, and women, children, the poor, minorities, prisoners and the mentally disabled were targeted for radio-isotope "tracer" studies, frequently without their consent and in some cases suffering excruciating side effects and premature deaths. In 1993, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary launched a campaign to make public all documents relating to the experiments, which had been kept secret. Welsome cogently argues that O'Leary's efforts resulted in a Republican vendetta that led to her ouster. Written with commendable restraint, this engrossing narrative draws liberally on declassified memos, briefings, phone calls, interviews and medical records to convey the enormity of the irradiation program and the bad science behind the flawed and dangerous testsAand to document the government's systematic cover-up. Anyone who cares about America's history, moral health and future should read this book. 8-city author tour. (Sept.)

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From Library Journal

Expanding on her Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper series, Welsome's shocking expos? reveals that during

the Cold War Americans were injected with plutonium without their knowledge in secret government experiments to see if radiation caused cancer. This is superb investigative journalism. (LJ 9/15/99)
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