



# University of Pittsburgh

*Graduate School of Public Health*  
*Office of the Dean*

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Donald S. Burke, MD  
Dean  
UPMC-Jonas Salk Chair in Global Health

January 8, 2018

Pamela W. Connelly, JD  
Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion  
University of Pittsburgh  
Room 540 Craig Hall  
200 South Craig Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Subject: Concern regarding the name of Parran Hall

Dear Dr. Connelly:

The main building of the Graduate School of Public Health is "Parran Hall", named after our founding Dean and former US Surgeon General, Thomas Parran. I write to request that the Office of Diversity and Inclusion form a review committee to consider whether the name "Parran Hall" is consistent with the University's mission to create a diverse and inclusive environment. Concerns have been raised both locally and nationally about Thomas Parran's legacy.

Thomas Parran began his career in the United States Public Health Service in 1917, working in rural health administration and sanitation. In 1926 he became the Chief of the Division of Venereal Diseases. He was a leading figure among public health progressives of the time, working to remove the stigma from venereal diseases and treat syphilis as a medical condition rather than a moral one [Parran 1937]. In 1930, Franklin Roosevelt brought Parran to the State of New York, where he set up the state's local and public health system. Parran also played an active role in the drafting of the Social Security Act and in the founding of the World Health Organization, all while continuing his crusade to make it socially acceptable to treat and control venereal disease. Roosevelt eventually brought Parran back to the Public Health Service, where he served as the Surgeon General of the United States from 1936 to 1948. Parran was a committed advocate of universal access to health care, developing much of the anticipated infrastructure for a national health insurance program before it became politically unachievable and was dropped. That advocacy in the face of political opposition led at least in part to Parran's departure from the

federal government. In 1948 he retired from the Public Health Service and became our founding Dean.

It is indisputable that Thomas Parran was one of the most important and effective progressive voices in public health in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The concerning aspects of Thomas Parran's legacy, however, revolve around his role in venereal disease studies that were conducted by the US Public Health Service under his leadership as Surgeon General.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study began in 1932, a partnership between the Public Health Service and Tuskegee University, a historically black college in Alabama [Jones 1992, Gray 2002, Reverby 2009]. Investigators enrolled approximately 600 extremely poor African-American sharecroppers, of whom about 2/3 already had syphilis. The goal of the study was to understand the natural history (natural course) of syphilis infection. The men were given free meals and medical care, but were never told they were infected, never treated, and never asked to give informed consent to any procedure. Over the early years of the study there were several junctures at which study leaders actively prevented the men from finding out about treatment programs that might have been available to them. The most critical point in the study came in the late 1940's, when penicillin became the effective and standard treatment, yet the men remained untreated and uninformed. The study did not end until 1972, by which point the victims included numerous men who had died of syphilis, 40 wives who contracted it, and 19 children born with it. The Tuskegee Study is considered, with good reason, to be one of the most notorious violations of human rights in medical research in US History. Last year papers were found in the collection of Thomas Parran's documents showing that he was more than a distant government bystander in the Tuskegee experiments, suggesting that he had been directly involved in the design of the studies. This unpublished manuscript of Parran's role in Tuskegee received wide public attention when it became the subject of an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* last year [Dober 2017, Bender 2017].

The other unethical human studies in which Parran had at least some level of responsibility were the syphilis studies conducted by the US Public Health Service in Guatemala from 1946 to 1948 [Reverby 2011, Reverby 2014]. Records of the experiments were discovered by Professor Susan Reverby of Wellesley College among the papers of John C. Cutler in the University of Pittsburgh Archives. After Dr. Cutler retired from the Public Health Service he joined the faculty of the Graduate School of Public Health. When he subsequently retired from the University, he left his papers from his time in the PHS as well as from his time at Pitt to the University Archives. In the Cutler syphilis studies, soldiers, prostitutes, prisoners, and mental patients in Guatemala were intentionally infected with syphilis and other venereal diseases. There was no informed consent, though some or most patients were subsequently treated with antibiotics. The findings prompted a formal apology from President Obama to the government of Guatemala. A Presidential Commission report on the study [2011], described the research as "unconscionable basic violations of ethics, even as judged against the researchers' own recognition of the requirements

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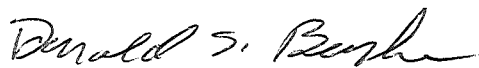
of the medical ethics of the day." Thomas Parran was Public Health Service Surgeon General at the time of the Guatemala studies, and records indicate that he was fully aware of them.

Parran's legacy has been a concern to us at the Graduate School of Public Health for some time. Not long after the revelations about the Guatemala syphilis studies came to light, we held a school-wide "town hall" meeting (24 March 2011) to openly discuss the historical facts and the lessons learned. Now, in the wake of the renewed concerns about Parran's role in the Tuskegee studies, we are planning another open town hall meeting (tentatively scheduled for 20 April 2018).

I now request that the University of Pittsburgh consider whether it is consistent with its mission to have the main Graduate School of Public Health building named for Thomas Parran.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Donald S. Burke".

Donald S. Burke, MD  
Distinguished University Professor of Health Science and Policy  
UPMC-Jonas Salk Professor of Global Health  
Dean, Graduate School of Public Health

cc: Arthur S. Levine, MD  
Senior Vice Chancellor for the Health Sciences

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