Government secretly put radiation into society

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WASHINGTON — They feared the threat of atomic war, of hostile superpowers firing nuclear missiles over the horizon, forever changing the lives of innocent civilians. But they never expected the radiation to come from their own government.

For the Inupiat Eskimos of northwest Alaska, it came from the caribou, which got it from the lichen, which absorbed it from the radioactive debris scattered across the tundra by scientists. For a group of cancer patients in Cincinnati — mostly poor, mostly black — it came in the form of "treatments" administered by an eminent researcher in radiation. For children at the Fernald School for the Mentally Retarded, it came along with their breakfast cereal, served up by researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Many test subjects were drawn from the ranks of society's dispossessed, either by virtue of their race, age, income or intelligence.

From Alaska to Boston, one of the Cold War's most chilling legacies is finally coming to light, dragged into the open by the agency that zealously safeguarded the nation's nuclear secrets for decades. At the direction of Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary, her department has vowed to "come clean" on the human radiation experiments sponsored by the federal government for nearly three decades.

Beyond the crudeness of some of the experiments lies another injustice: The subjects were not just human guinea pigs in a series of potentially lethal experiments. Many were drawn from the ranks of society's dispossessed, either by virtue of their race, age, income or intelligence.

In a sense, some were victims twice over: Already socially disadvantaged, they were used by a government and medical establishment that appeared to value science and prestige and military supremacy more highly than the rights of individuals on the fringes of society.

The picture that is emerging is one that, as a government scientist familiar with the testing put it in 1950, "has a little of the Buchenwald touch" — a reference to the Nazi concentration camp in which grotesque experiments were conducted on prisoners.

From 1945 until the mid-1970s — years of concern about the Soviet Union's military intentions — the federal government underwrote a number of experiments that involved exposing humans to highly radioactive substances.

In several experiments, scientists injected toxic plutonium into gravely injured hospital patients. They exposed indigent cancer patients to whole-body radiation 10 times more powerful than that recommended as treatment for leukemia. They dangled prison inmates' testicles in irradiated water and served poor pregnant women cocktails containing radioactive iron filings. And all of the research was financed with tax dollars.

As the government and the scientific community scour files for evidence of such experiments, they are confronting ethical issues as old as the Hippocratic oath and as recent as the 1947 Nuremberg convention, which articulated international standards of informed consent.

So far, O'Leary has discussed details of only one of the experiments. Others have come to light as a result of congressional hearings or independent investigations. Altogether, information involving more than 30 experiments has been disclosed.

Of those cases for which specific information is available, roughly a dozen involve subjects drawn from the ranks of the disadvantaged.

Ruth Faden, a medical ethicist at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University who will head the review panel created by O'Leary, said "it would not be surprising" if the full body of experiments were to show a significant pattern of abuse of vulnerable and dispossessed people.

In fairness, most of the experiments were conducted at a time when far less was known about the long-term hazards of radiation exposure, and they are being judged by far more sophisticated standards than were available to scientists at the time. Even so, the revelations raise disturbing questions about the subjects chosen.

Did the researchers understand that some of their experiments might be ethically questionable? Some of the principals have defended the studies as reasonable and necessary in light of the apparent threat of nuclear warfare. Today's critics say the choice of subjects suggests that scientists knew even then that their research might not stand up to public scrutiny.

Faden said the independent panel will focus on the standards used in choosing subjects and on the extent of informed consent by participants. In examining those issues, Faden said, members will consider whether Cold War anxiety — the sense of military urgency that clearly prompted support for many studies — is a valid excuse for any abuses.