

# Leonard Pitts Jr.: Skepticism can make you blind



They told them they had bad blood.

What they actually had was syphilis, but the U.S. Public Health Service never shared that diagnosis with the almost 400 African American men, most of them poor and under-educated sharecroppers, they recruited for a secret study at Tuskegee Institute in 1932. Indeed, health officials did little for those men for 40 years, except watch the progression of the disease.

That was the goal of the study: to see what happens when syphilis is left unchecked. And they did see. Syphilis is a venereal disease that can lead to paralysis, blindness, deafness, dementia, heart trouble, brain damage and death.

People often point to the so-called Tuskegee Experiment to explain why African Americans tend to mistrust the medical establishment, but while what happened in Alabama was obscene, it was hardly unique. To the contrary, from experimental procedures on the vaginas of enslaved women to grave robbers stealing Black bodies for use in medical schools, to forced sterilization in the name of eugenics, to studies revealing that white doctors think black people feel less pain, to new mother Serena Williams having to battle doctors and nurses who ignored her as she suffered a life-threatening medical emergency, Black people have been routinely betrayed by this profession whose prime directive is, “First, do no harm.” So the mistrust is grounded in hard experience.

I can speak to this at first hand. In recent years, I've lost a brother-in-law and a cousin after they declined to follow medical advice. Another brother-in-law has heart issues — and trusts his doctors about like he would a \$4 bill.

I also have two sons and a grandson who refuse to take the COVID vaccine. I am scared to death for them.

Most of the public discussion of vaccine hesitancy is dominated by Republicans behaving badly, the clownish people who think vaccines will magnetize them or let Bill Gates track their movements. But beyond political party, race (along with age) has emerged as a major predictor of skepticism. A recent Economist/YouGov poll found that less than half of Black and Hispanic adults have been fully vaccinated, compared with well over 60% of white ones. And mistrust is a major reason, though not the only reason, for that disparity.

My boys and I, we do this dance. They give me their reasons for not getting the shot, I give them rebuttals.

It was developed too fast, they say. It's called an emergency, I say; you get out of the house faster when it's burning.

I don't know what's in it, they say. You don't know what's in Cheez Whiz, I say, but that doesn't stop you from eating it.

There may be side effects to taking it, they say. Well, the side effect to not taking it could be death.

They nod and promise to think about it, but they don't. It's just a dance we do.

And while we dance, 616,000 Americans lie dead, a disproportionate number of them people of color.

There's nothing wrong with skepticism. Skepticism can be healthy, can even save your life. But skepticism also can make you blind. So this is me begging my sons and all our sons and daughters: Just take the damn shot.

Look around. People who've done that are not dying. People who haven't are. That's a fact. Please don't be so skeptical that you can't see what might save your life. I'm not asking you to trust your doctor.

I am asking you to trust your eyes.

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