*For consideration on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the first sustained nuclear chain reaction*

**University of Chicago Participation in Human Radiation Experiments**

The University of Chicago, along with several other institutions, participated in a number of human radiation experiments after World War II. Many of them are described in Eileen Welsome’s landmark *Plutonium Files: America’s Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War* (1999), the 1995 Final Report of the Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments (ACHRE; available online), but one Chicago experiment appears only in a 1986 report of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Energy Conservation and Power, “American Nuclear Guinea Pigs: Three Decades of Radiation Experiments on U.S. Citizens” (Ed Markey, chair; also available online). This experiment, in which real and simulated Nevada test site fallout was fed to 102 students and staff, took place from 1961 to 1963, is no more reprehensible than other experiments described in the report, but it is distinctive as a case in which an educational institution used its own students and staff as “nuclear calibration devices,” to use the language of the report’s “Summary and Conclusions.” The relevant passage appears on the back of this sheet, together with citation of the scientific paper in which the experiment was reported.

Universities are meant to be sites for the pursuit of knowledge. At times, this will take the form of uncovering chapters in their own histories that have been neglected, willfully or otherwise, as we have begun to see with the probe into the ties of universities and colleges with the institution of slavery. Would it not be fitting for the University of Chicago to initiate an examination of this component of the nuclear age as part of sustained engagement with “nuclear reactions”? What were the criteria, including relationship to government research, for embarking on such experimentation? Who was involved in the decisions? What was the relationship to the “nuclear medicine” program? What might it mean for students and staff to “volunteer” for faculty-led experiments? These issues have present-day pertinence for us.

The Markey Report urged the Department of Energy to “make every practicable effort to identify the persons who served as subjects for the experiments described … to examine the long term histories of subjects for an increased incidence of radiation-associated diseases, and to compensate these human guinea pigs for damages they have suffered.” This was in 1986.

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**University of Chicago Radiation Experimentation on Students and Staff (1961-63)**

