

No Laughing Matter: The Risks that Human Research Subjects Face

Posted by Jillian Theil on November 18th, 2010

Earlier this year, the [Rick Mercer Report](#) (RMR) – a Canadian television program rather like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* – featured an [interview](#) with University of Manitoba professor [Gordon Giesbrecht](#) about his experiments with human body responses to cold water. Giesbrecht – aka Dr. Popsicle – has undoubtedly contributed to greater understanding of cold stress physiology, but the blasé attitude of the RMR discussion of human research subjects is disconcerting.

The segment runs like this:

Rick Mercer: So students pay to study with you, and then you give them hypothermia, is that the idea?

Giesbrecht laughs, joined by a background laugh track.

Giesbrecht: Actually, we uh...

Mercer: Have you given many students hypothermia?

Giesbrecht: Oh yea, many. Hundreds.

Mercer: But that's very painful

Giesbrecht: Yea it is painful. And that's why we actually pay them.

Mercer: Oh, how much do they get paid? A lot?

Giesbrecht: A hundred dollars each time they come.

Mercer laughs, also accompanied by a laugh track.

Giesbrecht is shown preparing Mercer for a tub of cold water.

Mercer: (laughing) A hundred bucks!

Giesbrecht: (laughs) It's not looking like so much money anymore, eh?



A victim immersed by Nazi doctors in freezing water.

While bringing media coverage and pop culture to science is a good thing, encouraging people to be glib about serious topics – like the dangers faced by human research subjects – is not.

When understood in the context of an unfortunately rich history of abuses against human research subjects, the RMR segment becomes a lot less comical. Such horrific abuses include the “[experiments](#)” conducted by Nazi doctors, in which victims were forced into a tank of ice water for up to three hours.

There is no reason to believe that Giesbrecht is putting the participants in his studies at risk; Giesbrecht has himself been a human subject in his cold water experiments. But mistreatment of human research subjects is not just a problem of the past. CGS’s Osagie Obasogie has [written](#) about disturbing trends, many created by powerful market forces:

Contrary to hopes of human research reform spurred by Jesse Gelsinger's death, oversight has flattened, profit motives have become more entrenched in medical research, and the pool of potential human subjects has come to focus on the vulnerable, both at home and abroad.

To Rick Mercer and Dr. Giesbrechts' credit, a [more recent](#) Rick Mercer Report brought coverage (and comedy) to Giesbrecht’s research *without* making light of the need to protect human research subjects.

Previously on *Biopolitical Times*:

- [Research Ethics at Minnesota](#)
- [No More Guatemalas](#)
- [Ten Years Later: Jesse Gelsinger's Death and Human Subjects Protection](#)



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