



# The Plutonium Files: America's Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War

*Eileen Welsome*

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When the vast wartime factories of the Manhattan Project began producing plutonium in quantities never before seen on earth, scientists working on the top-secret bomb-building program grew apprehensive. Fearful that plutonium might cause a cancer epidemic among workers and desperate to learn more about what it could do to the human body, the Manhattan Project's medical doctors embarked upon an experiment in which eighteen unsuspecting patients in hospital wards throughout the country were secretly injected with the cancer-causing substance. Most of these patients would go to their graves without ever knowing what had been done to them.

Now, in **The Plutonium Files**, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Eileen Welsome reveals for the first time the breadth of the extraordinary fifty-year cover-up surrounding the plutonium injections, as well as the deceitful nature of thousands of other experiments conducted on American citizens in the postwar years.

Welsome's remarkable investigation spans the 1930s to the 1990s and draws upon hundreds of newly declassified documents and other primary sources to disclose this shadowy chapter in American history. She gives a voice to such innocents as Helen Hutchison, a young woman who entered a prenatal clinic in Nashville for a routine checkup and was instead given a radioactive "cocktail" to drink; Gordon Shattuck, one of several boys at a state school for the developmentally disabled in Massachusetts who was fed radioactive oatmeal for breakfast; and Maude Jacobs, a Cincinnati woman suffering from cancer and subjected to an experimental radiation treatment designed to help military planners learn how to win a nuclear war.

Welsome also tells the stories of the scientists themselves, many of whom learned the ways of secrecy on the Manhattan Project. Among them are Stafford Warren, a grand figure whose bravado masked a cunning intelligence; Joseph Hamilton, who felt he was immune to the dangers of radiation only to suffer later from a fatal leukemia; and physician Louis Hempelmann, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the plan to inject humans with potentially carcinogenic doses of plutonium. Hidden discussions of fifty years past are reconstructed here, wherein trusted government officials debated the ethical and legal implications of the experiments, demolishing forever the argument that these studies took place in a less enlightened era.

Powered by her groundbreaking reportage and singular narrative gifts, Eileen Welsome has created a work of profound humanity as well as major historical significance.

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