

Pharmaceutical Tests on Prison Population Another Form of Modern-Day Slavery?
By Tonyaa Weathersbee

Around Alabama, South Carolina, and even in New York City, you'll find statues of J. Marion Sims. What you won't find are statues or, for that matter, many mentions of Anarcha.

Back in the mid-to-late 1800s, Sims performed at least 30 experiments on Anarcha, a slave woman, in a quest for a way to treat a 19th century childbirth complication that caused many women to leak urine from their vaginas after developing connections between it and their bladder.

Sims developed a treatment for the painful and embarrassing ailment that still afflicts many Third World women; he built his legacy off of the pain of slaves like Anarcha. Women like her endured the experiments with no anesthesia. People like Sims believed that black people's pain and anonymity were merely part of the landscape of privilege to which whites believed they were entitled.

A disproportionately-black population could be reduced to guinea pigs. Recently, a federal panel recommended that the government lighten up on regulations that restrict prison inmates from being used as subjects in pharmaceutical tests.

According to The New York Times, such testing all but ended more than three decades ago, after some prisoners were exposed to dangerous substances such as dioxin. Leodus Jones, a former inmate at Philadelphia's Holmesburg prison in the 1960s, told the Times that lotion tests caused him to develop rashes, and his skin to change color.

We don't need to go down that road again. Now, I understand that it's tough to make medical progress without some human experimentation. There's also a possibility that some of the inmates who participate in the pharmaceutical tests might wind up helping companies find cures for ailments that disproportionately dog black people.

Though black inmates are not slaves as Anarcha, when it comes to such experimentation, being in prison makes them vulnerable to becoming slaves to coercion and their own desperation.

One of the reasons that drug companies are looking to test more on prisoners now is because many of them haven't been able to get large enough populations of non-inmates to test on. That's one of the reasons why Vioxx was pulled from the market. Proponents argue that with greater oversight, the possibility for abuse will be minimal.

Oversight in prisons never works as well as people intend it to. On top of that, pharmaceutical companies tend to be driven more by profits than by principle -- and we

all know that when the drive to make money kicks in, those who fuel the engines for that drive are ridden to the core.

There's also another reason why I hate this. The United States now is the world's biggest jailer, thanks to lopsided numbers of black men being imprisoned for crimes that could be prevented if this country had the will to revitalize their communities economically. Many of the black men in prison are there because of crimes related to the crack cocaine trade -- a trade that has moved into black communities as jobs and amenities have moved out.

Once again, this country can't seem to find any use for black men until they are confined. When they are on the outside, they are pushed out of jobs and education, and out of all the things that could help them avoid a life of crime, but once incarcerated, their worth increases.

They become valuable to prison corporations that capitalize on their pathology to create prison jobs for rural whites. They become valuable to prison industries, where they work for meager wages in jobs that either don't exist on the outside, or no one will hire them to do.

And now, they're becoming valuable to medical research and to pharmaceutical companies -- companies whose drugs they or their relatives probably wouldn't be able to afford without planning to eat oatmeal for a week.

Yet, it's not surprising that someone would get around to finding another reason to exploit this modern-day slavery -- the slavery of mass incarceration. And while some prisoners might wind up helping a company or scientists make history by hiring their bodies out to test a treatment for a certain sickness, chances are no one will ever care about the societal and economic ills that led to their imprisonment.

Nor, like Anarcha, will people even see their names.

About Me: An award-winning columnist for the Florida Times-Union who has appeared on Nightline and BET Tonight, Weathersbee's insightful commentaries have been published in the Houston Chronicle, Baltimore Sun and Kansas City Star. Read this and other essays at www.blackamericaweb.com.