**No freedom to do harm**

In the 1960s, MIT was the Wild West when it came to human experimentation. There was no rule against faculty hypnotizing students to plant suggestions in their heads. No oversight committee existed to prevent a graduate student from intentionally deceiving volunteers, advertising payments he later decreased in value. And when a student wound up hospitalized after accepting LSD from a professor, nothing prevented his teacher from continuing to preach that the potent chemicals would help his students “commune with god.” There was simply nobody to say no – until Hans-Lukas Teuber arrived on campus in 1961.

Initially hired within the economics department, Teuber went on to launch the psychology department that eventually became today’s Brain and Cognitive Sciences department. He recruited five professors, all with medical backgrounds, to sustain his ambitious research that cautiously explored experimental psychology from a perspective inextricably partnered with biological and medical expertise.

Expecting this new department to expand over time, MIT gifted Teuber a building converted from an abandoned automobile assembly plant. It was located at 79 Amherst St.[[1]](#endnote-1), where the MIT Media Lab now stands.[[2]](#endnote-2) His team felt quite small in their large, empty space. “We … were rolling around like marbles,” Teuber said in an interview for MIT’s Oral History Collection in 1976.

Those three earlier incidents on campus involving hypnosis, LSD, and deception determined one of his first orders of business: cracking down on reckless experimental practices. This sent a wave of chatter throughout the MIT community, especially after the student newspaper [*The Tech* ran a short article](http://tech.mit.edu/archives/VOL_083/TECH_V083_S0083_P003.pdf) about Teuber cancelling the study that discounted promised payments to volunteers. In the piece, Teuber took a public stance against studies involving deception, calling the procurement of subjects at MIT “free-wheeling”[[3]](#endnote-3) and announcing that no such studies would be conducted at MIT moving forward. Teuber believed he knew better than his colleagues, who complained that his staunch viewpoints threatened their academic freedom.

Before arriving at MIT, Teuber had spent thirteen years heading up New York University’s psychophysiology lab at the prestigious Bellevue Hospital Center. While there, he watched one patient die from an overdose of mescaline, known to have similar effects to LSD. To him, this incident underscored the dangers of people perceiving hallucinogens as “relatively harmless” novelties, despite the risks known to doctors that new drugs could cause sudden metabolic shifts. He saw deception in these cases and diagnosed the patients involved as unwittingly choosing to walk the line between life and death.

Much of Teuber’s pioneering Bellevue research took place during the Vietnam War, when he relied on his medical expertise to examine how brain injuries in veterans connected to behavioral changes.[[4]](#endnote-4) This ultimately led Teuber to make important strides connecting brain sciences to experimental psychology, and MIT recognized the potential in that endeavor. He brought with him the informal protocols that had steered responsible research practices at Bellevue. But he quickly realized he couldn’t be the sole arbiter of proposed MIT studies. He needed back-up.

So in 1962, he established at MIT the Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects, putting in place a review process to steer responsible research. His instinct was bounds ahead of any major policy governing biomedical research. His committee gathered two years before the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Helsinki, four years before the U.S. Surgeon General policy on Clinical Investigations Using Human Subjects, and more than a decade before the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study prompted the National Research Act of 1974.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Teuber selected MIT Medical Director Albert Seeler[[6]](#endnote-6) as head of the original committee, and its members were the psychiatrist-in-chief Benson Snyder, biophysicist Martin Lubin, and a doctor who was already recognized as a medical safety regulations pioneer[[7]](#endnote-7), Harriet Hardy.

Interviewed in 1976 for the MIT Oral History Collection, Hardy described Seeler’s committee as “pretty balanced,” with Lubin often advocating for fellow investigators, Snyder asking pointed medical questions, and Hardy serving as staunch defender of patient rights. “We were very different people from different backgrounds, so I think the investigator had fair treatment,” Hardy said, recalling only a few major disagreements that had divided the committee. She summed up her stance in a letter to Seeler in 1966, “I believe that the dignity of the life of the investigated is far more important to society in the long run than the investigator and his study.”

She and Teuber made a formidable pair safeguarding against patient deception in those unruly early days when researchers refused promised payments or doctors fed placebos to sick patients. “I always thought that the issues involving experiments with deception built into them were the most difficult ones and the ones that require the most care,” Teuber said. Their paradigm-shifting perspectives led MIT away from trusting doctors to solely determine a study’s risks to adopting informed consent as best practice. This required that patients heard about known risks before signing on as study participants.

In his interview, Teuber recalled a confrontation with a respected MIT professor who’d been hypnotizing students for an “apparently federally-funded” study, saying, “He was astounded why I should oppose the march of science.” But for Teuber, there were limits to academic freedom: “There is no freedom to do harm.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Temporary Staff Telephone Directory, T1.M42b.S77 1962. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections, Cambridge, Massachusetts [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Visiting the Lab.” *MIT Media Lab*, www.media.mit.edu/about/visiting-the-lab/. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Experiment Suspended Due to Complaint.” *The Tech*. 20 March 1963. http://tech.mit.edu/archives/VOL\_083/TECH\_V083\_S0083\_P003.pdf Accessed December 04, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gross, Charles. “Hans-Lukas Teuber: A Tribute.” Cerebral Cortex. Volume 4, Issue 5, September 1994, Pages 451–454. <https://academic.oup.com/cercor/article-abstract/4/5/451/332208> Accessed December 04, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Resnik, David B. “Research Ethics Timeline.” National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/timeline/index.cfm. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “The MIT Medical Department 1901-2004.” *MIT*, web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/224/mitmedical.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Changing the Face of Medicine | Harriet Louise Hardy.” *U.S. National Library of Medicine*, National Institutes of Health, 3 June 2015, cfmedicine.nlm.nih.gov/physicians/biography\_138.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Oral History Interviews on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects, MC 133. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections, Cambridge, Massachusetts. https://archivesspace.mit.edu/repositories/2/resources/681 Accessed December 04, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)