





The [Declaration of Helsinki](#) governs modern medical ethics, and applies to the practice of medicine as well as medical research using human patients as research subjects. Prior to World War II, there was no international consensus on ethical principles regarding the conduct of research on humans, and little had been written about it, save a German document from 1900, an AMA document from 1916, and a Russian text from 1936. The criminal trials of the World War II German medical doctors, famously known as the Nuremberg trials, brought to light the extent of human experimentation that occurred to prisoners during the war. These trials, by exposing the atrocities committed by medical professionals in the name of science, paved the way for the development of modern medical ethics constructs and for our current philosophies regarding the conduct of research on human patients.



**The Defendants at Nuremberg**  
Courtesy of National Archives

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**Bird's-eye View of Trial**  
From the Library of Congress

For a thorough summary of the history and development of the original Declaration of Helsinki in 1964, look [here](#).

In our next post in this series, we'll continue to explore the foundations of medical ethics by reviewing the two main classical theories in ethics: deontology and utilitarianism,

and how they have evolved to apply to modern day medical ethics.