



Overdue: PSU should return Amazon blood samples

By Patriot-News Editorial Board

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Penn State must give blood samples back to Yanomami.

Penn State University prides itself on academics, athletics and "improving the well-being and health of individuals and communities," according to its mission.

But in Brazil, there is a different view of Penn State.

The university is the largest holder of blood samples from an Amazon tribe known as the Yanomami.

In 2006, the Brazilian government formally asked for the blood back.

Today, the blood still sits in a freezer in State College.

The samples have created a worldwide ethical firestorm. They were collected in the 1960s by two American researchers. Accounts vary on how much the tribe understood what was happening and whether the tribe was promised medical and other assistance that it never received. That is a debate for another day.

It was an era before "informed consent" was the norm much like the case of the African-American woman Henrietta Lacks whose cells were taken from a cancerous tumor when she died in 1951 and used for medical research.

In the case of the Yanomami blood, there is a clear way to put things right: return the blood so it can be destroyed in the Yanomami custom. The tribe believes all parts of the dead must be destroyed before a person can depart this world.

Penn State was once seen as a hero in this decadeslong saga.

After the Brazilian government made its formal request, Penn State is credited with getting the other holders of the blood — the American Cancer Institute and three other universities — on board with the notion of returning the blood samples. State College is housing one of the other university's samples in an effort to streamline the return.

Everything seemed on track for a smooth transition.

But here in 2010, Penn State is gaining a negative reputation for not keeping its word and drowning the situation in red tape.

When we called Penn State this week to inquire about the status, spokeswoman Lisa Powers reaffirmed the university's commitment to returning the blood, but said, "We have never been given a specific person to send the blood to and in what manner."

That answer falls flat.

A Brazilian newspaper reported last week that a plan is in place to have the universities and American