The Degradation of Medical Ethics in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

In her book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot reveals how Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman diagnosed with cervical cancer, was exploited by the medical community for the development of the immortal “HeLa” cells that have since become the most widely used cells for medical research and advancement from the 20th century to the present day. The HeLa cells have since led to the formulation of the polio vaccination along with groundbreaking research on diseases such as AIDS, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization, and possible treatments for various forms of cancer in humans (Zielinski). However, this breach of medical ethics in regards to removing Lacks’ cervical cells without her knowledge or consent has led to questions regarding whether or not the medical community was ethically justified in taking such a controversial course of action despite its positive outcomes. In order to convey the potential benefits of the HeLa cell, doctors have exploited hundreds, if not thousands of patients with cancerous specimen under false pretenses. The inhumane nature of such scientific malfeasance cannot hope to justify the end results regardless of the various diseases that have been eliminated from its development.
The issue of whether or not the actions taken by the medical community in utilizing human tissue without the consent of the patient lies at the very core of Henrietta Lacks’ debacle. Chester Southam, the chief virologist at the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research, is just one of many examples of the great lengths those in the medical profession were willing to go in order to prove the effectiveness of the HeLa cancer cells. Southam and his contemporaries theorized that cancer was caused by either a virus or an immune deficiency, and in order to test this hypothesis he subsequently injected four hundred cancer patients with HeLa cells to study their biological reaction. Although his intentions were admirable in discovering the underlying causes for such a deadly disease, Southam consciously deceived his patients, telling them that “he was testing their immune systems; he said nothing about injecting them with someone else’s malignant cells.” The results proved disastrous for some of the patients that were injected with the cells with one patient’s report stating, “Henrietta’s cells metastasized” (Skloot, 128). After reviewing the results of the cancer patients, Southam then decided to test the HeLa cells on six hundred other patients awaiting gynecologic surgery, telling them that he was “testing them for cancer” (Skloot, 130). This notion of a medical professional willingly endangering the lives of his patients for the purported benefit of the greater good was not the first time such immoral action was taken. A decade before Henrietta Lacks was even diagnosed with cancer, Nazi physicians had conducted research on Jewish inmates that remains unimaginable to this day. Reports of doctors “sewing siblings together to create Siamese twins” and “dissecting people alive to study organ function” were just a few of the vile experiments doctors had initiated in the name of science and societal progress (Skloot, 131). After World War II had ended, such atrocities had led to the formulation of
the Nuremburg Code that aimed at regulating human experimentation on a global scale. Its ten-point plan stated that “The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential” (Skloot, 131). Although introduced years before Southam had begun his research on the HeLa cell, the Nuremburg Code remained relatively unknown in the American medical community; most American doctors and researchers claimed that the resolution “applied to barbarians and dictators, not to American doctors” (Skloot, 131). In August 1963, during Southam’s research trials, three doctors from the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital (JCDH) that had collaborated with him resigned from their positions, asserting that “injecting cancer cells into a person without consent was a clear violation of basic human rights and the Nuremburg Code” (Skloot, 132). Emanuel Mandel, the director of medicine at the JCDH who had worked extensively with Southam in his research, arranged a meeting with one of the doctors that had resigned and accused him of being overly sensitive due to his Jewish ancestry. This led William Hyman, a lawyer and member of the hospital’s board of directors, to accuse both Southam and Mandel of fraud and unprofessional conduct, demanding that their medical licenses should be immediately revoked by the State of New York’s Board of Regents (Skloot, 134). The ensuing trial resulted in the board finding both Southam and Mandel guilty of “fraud or deceit and unprofessional conduct in the practice of medicine,” which ultimately led to a one year suspension of their medical licenses. This monumental decision in favor of the informed consent of patients culminated in the National Institute of Health’s decision that in order to qualify for funding, “all proposals for research on human subjects had to be approved by review boards to ensure that they met NIH’s ethics requirements” which
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reaffirmed the rights of patients and test subjects that were established by the Nuremberg Code that had been largely ignored for over fifteen years (Skloot, 135).

The initial ignorance and lack of ethical behavior in the American medical community reveals even more startling concerns over medical ethics and its application in western society. Any noteworthy medical or scientific practitioner can claim that their empirical experimentation of human beings can benefit mankind itself, but seldom do such ambitious goals truly come to fruition. Jeremy Bentham, the 18th century founder of modern utilitarianism, reveals the inner flaws of humanity’s need to justify their actions with the end result, noting that man does not seek to answer ethical questions such as “Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but rather Can they suffer?” (Encyclopedia Britannica). Although society ultimately benefits from the development of HeLa, the immoral practices that were the foundation for such advancement cannot be simply overshadowed by the reward that came from it. If such an assertion was considered valid, then the actions of the Nazi physicians that committed such unspeakable crimes could also be justified by their goals of racial purity and societal security. Any of the research collected for the promotion of the HeLa cells was capable of being administered without the violation of human dignity and informed consent.
Works Cited


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