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Response to The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Her cells helped to cure polio, improve the lives of millions of people, make men rich, and have even journeyed to space. To this day, her cells are used in research labs around the world, and yet, until only recently, the world did not even know her name. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks reveals the incredible story of the woman behind the HeLa cells, and the family she left behind. In doing so it adds a human side removing the cold, impersonal nature of this renowned scientific discovery, and raises serious ethical questions about patient's rights, namely, should a patient have the right to consent to testing or treatment being administered to them, and does a person retain ownership of their biological material even after it is removed from their body? Rebecca Skloot does her best to expose the incredible injustices carried out by researchers during this time, and she shows us that all of this scientific advancement has come at a price.

Dr. Chester Southam, a researchers at Hopkins, would frequently perform tests on patients such as injecting them with malignant cells to see how they would react. He saw nothing wrong with this, and when he would perform these tests "he said nothing about injecting them with someone else's malignant cells"(127). Henrietta had samples of her own cells collected and used in tests without her knowledge or consent. It was these cells that eventually became the famous HeLa, labeled by the initials of the patients first and last name. Although Rebecca Skloot tries to remain impartial in her commentary, there are numerous points where she implies
that certain scientists have disregarded morality for the sake of scientific progress. Indeed, inoculating an unsuspecting patient with cancerous cells simply to observe the effects seems to be an indefensible act. We now have laws and regulations to help ensure that things like this do not occur, but 50 years ago it was a different story.

During the 1950's and 60's, doctors did not have to disclose much about the nature of their actions to their patients. The understanding in those days was that a layman could never truly attain the same level of understanding as a doctor who went through college and medical school, and as such most doctors did not bother explaining treatment options or illnesses to their patients, nor were they forced to by any laws. Hopkins was one of the few hospitals that treated black patients for miles around, and so it was always crowded with black patients who were desperate for treatment. The Lack's and many other low income black families' who went to knew that they were not educated and placed blind faith in the doctors at Hopkins to do what was best for their patients. They had no idea that they were being tested and experimented on. The system at Hopkins was rationalized under the basis that since patients were receiving quality treatment, it was only fair that researchers should be allowed to perform tests on them as compensation. Although they likely did not see it this way, the researchers at Hopkins were taking advantage of the ignorance of their patients and using it to exploit them in order to advance their personal goals.

Skloot examines the stories of the doctors and researchers involved in the HeLa case and most of them seem to have similar attitudes about what they were doing, seeing it as just as long as it was being done in the name of progress. After his research on black patients at Hopkins, Dr. Southam moved on to testing prison inmates who were fully aware that they were being used as human guinea pigs. Most doctors at the time believed that revealing details to their patients
would breed "phobia and ignorance" (129) in the minds of their patients. This elitist attitude gives an impression of the sense of superiority felt by many of these scientists who felt that because they were more educated they were permitted to take any action they saw fit since in their minds they knew better than their patients. After WWII the Nuremburg Code set the standard for ethics when it came to scientific research. It was a 10 point code that was created in response to the horrific experiments carried out by Dr. Josef Mengele during the Holocaust. The Nuremburg Code was not law, however, and there was still no legal obligation for doctors and researchers to inform their patients of any procedures taking place. The Nuremburg Code was seen as simply a guideline meant for Nazi war criminals, not American scientists.

The world of medical research was turned on its head when three young Jewish doctors resigned in protest of Dr. Southam's research methods. These doctors cited violations of the Nuremburg Code in the research practices being conducted on patients. They brought these issues of lack of consent and patient awareness to court and for the first time, patient's rights became a huge issue. The Jewish doctors won their case and there was a massive public outcry against Southam and various other doctors, whose actions were being called "illegal, immoral, and deplorable" (133).

Two big issues that are related directly to Henrietta's case are the concept of an ethical death and entitlement money. The HeLa cells that never died were a part of Henrietta's body. They were kept alive, multiplied, and sold to labs across the globe. If a part of a person still lives outside of their body, long after they are dead, can it be assumed that this is a part of the living person? If so does the family have rights to it? Either way it seems hard to justify the fact that the family were kept completely in the dark about the cell's existence, and it seems unjust that a
A tremendous amount of money has been made from the sale of HeLa while Henrietta's decedence live in poverty.

Rebecca Skloot tells a fascinating story with compassion and grace, one that has far reaching ramifications today. While much of the medical malpractice that went on in Henrietta's time has been rectified, and new laws and ethical codes help to prevent it, there are still some grey areas in the field of research even today, particularly regarding tissue samples. While a great many people have been helped by HeLa, and its use and discovery stand as a testament to the miracles of modern science, Rebecca Skloot has shown us the human cost to this achievement, and has shown us that regardless of how noble our goals may seem, we must always uphold morality.

Works Cited