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Mathematics Across Time

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Henrietta Lacks was a southern African American woman in the 1950s who suffered from the same injustice and discrimination all African Americans did at the time. Therefore it would not be unusual for an African American in her position to be turned down by a hospital because they only served whites. Yet amidst the Jim Crow laws and segregation Henrietta was still able to obtain quality free public healthcare from one of the top hospitals in the country. Even while under their care, her treatment was similar to that of a white woman in a similar situation. Based on the circumstances of the time period, Henrietta Lacks was fortunate to be treated reasonably and respectfully unlike many others during her time in the south.

When Henrietta was admitted to Johns Hopkins it was one of the top hospitals in the country, and was the only major hospital near Henrietta to serve African Americans. Just as all African Americans who received treatment from Hopkins at that time, she was segregated from the white patients, yet still received care from a specialist in the field of gynecology, Howard Jones. At that time in history it would not have been rare for an African American woman like Henrietta to be turned down by similar institutions. While under his care, Howard Jones and the staff at Johns Hopkins treated Henrietta and her tumor like any other patient at the time. According to Skloot, “Like hospitals nationwide, Hopkins treated all invasive cervical carcinomas with radium” which proves that Henrietta received standard treatments based on the time period (Skloot 31-32).

Additionally Henrietta also received the ideal post treatment examinations and follow up care. “Doctors examined her in and out” and conducted a thorough examination to ensure that the cancer was removed and that she was going to make a full recovery (Skloot 40). Henrietta’s doctors followed her radium treatments with regularly scheduled follow-ups and x-ray treatments. Howard Jones’ reports “Henrietta got the same care any white patient would have: the biopsy, the radium treatment, and radiation were all standards of the day” (Skloot 64). Therefore Henrietta was not subjected to any outdated or inferior treatments because of the color of her skin or her gender which is amazing accomplishment while living in a segregated southern society.

Around the time Henrietta Lacks was receiving medical care from Hopkins; other doctors were performing inhuman experiments on African Americans without their consent. Although the Nuremberg code states ‘“Voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential,”’ it never became federal law while Henrietta or any other African American was receiving treatment in the 1950s (Skloot 131). Thus it was not illegal for patients to become research subjects without their consent or knowledge. Many doctors around the 1950s deemed it acceptable to use patients from public wards as research subjects in return for free public health care (Skloot 30). One example, starting the in 1930s, of doctors abusing their rights was during the Tuskegee Syphilis study which lured patients with offers of free physical exams. However these poor uneducated African Americans were unknowingly infected and killed by syphilis in order to conduct research on the disease (Skloot 50). Again in the 1950s, Chester Southam, a highly-respected cancer researcher and chief of virology at Sloan-Kettering Institution for Cancer Research, began injecting cancer into patients without their consent (Skloot 128). African Americans were easy targets for researchers because of racial discrimination and lack of legal medical oversight which proves that Henrietta is lucky to receive the quality care that she did from Johns Hopkins.

In general doctors throughout society in the 1950s had control over their patients because of their expertise. Patients rarely questioned the authority of a doctor, especially African Americans in a public ward because they believed they were fortunate just to receive free quality healthcare. As a result of this unquestionable medical authority, “benevolent deception,” was a widespread trend among physicians who kept their patients in the dark regarding basic information and even their diagnosis (Skloot 63). Therefore it was not unusual for doctors, who were treating Henrietta, to not tell her information about her procedures or that her cancer treatments may cause infidelity. Based on the standard practices of her time, Henrietta was treated fairly and ethically like any other patient that would have been treated by her doctors.

 Henrietta Lacks was a poor uneducated African American in the segregated south that was still treated with standardized treatments without being discriminated for her race or her gender. Doctors treated her like any other patient at the time and this included withholding information because it was generally accepted that doctors were always correct. Henrietta was also treated ethically by her doctors when many doctors in the 1950s took advantage of their patients’ ignorance. Henrietta Lacks should be fortunate that as a deprived citizen, she was able to receive quality medical treatment from an elite hospital.

Work Cited

Skloot, Rebecca. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. Crown Publishing Group. 2010.