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How Ethical was the Case of Henrietta Lacks?

Henrietta Lacks, a young, vivacious woman, died on October 4, 1951, after being diagnosed and treated for cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The mid-forties and early-fifties were a time for scientific growth and development: development that would be forever changed by Henrietta Lacks. Shortly before her death, scientist George Gey discovered just how impressive Henrietta’s cancer cells were, and began distributing them. In hindsight, many people believe Henrietta Lacks received unethical treatment and was beguiled by her white doctors – an idea that is biased by ethical guidelines in place today. Rebecca Skloot, a young writer, wrote *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* a non-fiction slanted piece on how immorally Henrietta and her family were treated by the doctors. However, when truly understanding life in the early 1950s, one could hardly say Lacks was treated unfairly, especially when contrasted to other studies at the time, such Tuskegee Study, Nazi Experimentation, and project “Unit 731”. While sick, Henrietta Lacks received some of the best treatment around for a black woman, and with no ethical codes set in place, the tests done on “her” seem rather benign.

For the early ‘50s, when segregation and prejudice were still commonly found, Henrietta’s cancer treatment seems reasonable. Johns Hopkins was a hospital free of fee for those who could not afford it, even blacks. When Henrietta arrived at the hospital, the staff did their best to identify her condition and treat her as soon as they knew what was wrong. “According to Howard Jones, Henrietta got the same care any white patient would have had; the biopsy, the radium treatment, and radiation were all standard for the day” (Skloot 64). Though readers of today cannot be sure if Henrietta received treatment equivocal to that a white person would have received for “several studies have shown that black patients were treated and hospitalized at later stages of their illnesses than white patients. And once hospitalized, they got fewer pain medications, and had higher morality rates”, Henrietta’s treatment was standard for her color for the time (Skloot 64). Henrietta immediately received a biopsy and underwent radiation treatment – the same steps that would have been taken for any white person at the time. In fact, before her cervical cancer spread throughout her entire lower abdomen, “her doctors were so sure of her recovery that while she was in the hospital for her second radium treatment, they’d preformed reconstructive surgery on her nose, fixing the deviated septum that had given her sinus infections and headaches her whole life” (Skloot 46). Each treatment of radiation, blood transfusions and even the reconstructive surgery was gratis. The doctors truly believed ridding her from cancer “was a new beginning” – a start at a new life – for Henrietta, and they did the best they could to help her (Skloot 46). And, when the doctors realized that despite their best efforts, Henrietta’s case was irreversible, “each day, Henrietta’s doctors increased her dose of radiation, hoping it would shrink the tumors and ease the pain until her death” (Skloot 65). Henrietta’s care and overall comfort were extremely important to the doctors at Johns Hopkins, as exemplified by their multiple complimentary procedures to try to cure her and lessen her pain.

But still, the question remains as to whether the doctors had the right to use Henrietta’s cells. In 2010, seemingly all professions all over the world are riddled with ethical guidelines that are not only recommended, but required. In the 1940s and ‘50s, though, these engraved codes that are around today, were only just suggestions, and not followed by everyone – especially in the medical field. When asked if Henrietta’s doctors were in the wrong, many people bluntly say yes, the doctors did not have the proper consent. Rebecca Skloot, the author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, does not inform her readers that it is not illegal for a doctor to use cells left behind or taken during exams until more than halfway into her book. Here, she briefly states in 1990, the Supreme Court ruled “when tissues are removed for your body, with or without your consent, any claim you might have had to owing them vanishes” (Skloot 205). In fact, consent for a doctor to keep and distribute a patient’s cells is still not even required today, which isn’t mentioned until the afterword. Skloot tried to write her book in order to prejudice her readers against the Johns Hopkins doctors who treated Henrietta and all doctors in general. Two minuscule sections of her book are spent writing about how the doctors treating Henrietta really hadn’t done much of anything wrong – but since the majority of her book slanders doctors of the time, the juxtaposition could cause a reader to be tricked to making rash conclusions. Neither Henrietta’s doctors, the ones who did not inform her that she was soon to die and the ones who took her cells, nor George Guy, the man who discovered her immortal cells, did anything unethical for the time. Today, our modern society probably would have required consent for many of the treatments that were performed on Henrietta, but in the 1950s, consent was not required and so the doctors could not be considered unethical.

Due to the fact that consent was only recommended, doctors in the mid-1900s had to deal with their own personal morality while trying to further science. One of the major questions doctors had to battle with was “hurt one, save one hundred”: if you could save one hundred by sacrificing one individual, would you? Many scientists said yes, and because of this, dozens of notorious experiments were conducted. Tuskegee Study took place over forty years, starting in 1932, in Alabama. Here, doctors studying Syphilis both passively and actively killed 600 people. The subjects were not informed that during the time this study was going on, a cure was found which could have saved them all (Skloot 50). At several Nazi concentration camps, such as Auschwitz and Nuremberg, subjects were imprisoned and tested on. Subjects were sewn together, frozen, and poisoned to see how the body reacted to such treatments (http://www.ushmm.org). Finally, Unit 731 was a research center during World War II, controlled by the Japanese, where prisoners were raped to see how viruses spread, vivisected without anesthesia, and used to test weapons and bombs (cosmolearning.com). Each of these “research studies” took place at about the same time when Henrietta’s cells were taken without her permission. Some might claim that the doctors who “stole” these cells were acting out of pure selfishness and abused authority, just like the researchers in these experiments. However, these scientists, the ones who are still alive, that is, would say that they were not conducting these studies to exude power, but to further the science field. Like it or not, the scientific community learned immense details about human development during this time, even though most of the studies might be considered unethical and immoral today. So overall, removing “two dime-sized pieces of tissue from Henrietta’s cervix…” for cellular research seems very benign, especially when “[the researchers] were sure Henrietta’s cells would die just like all the others” shows that Henrietta’s doctors were not trying to harm or steal from her, but better further science in general (Skloot 33).

Johns Hopkins willed money to start a hospital where its staff would treat “the indigent sick of this city and its environs, without regard to sex, age, or color, who require surgical or medical treatment, and who can be received into the hospital without peril to other inmates…without charge” (Skloot 167). From what can be deduced by reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, around the time Henrietta was treated at Johns Hopkins, the doctors were trying their best to uphold this mission statement. Henrietta was treated for her cervical cancer to the best of the doctors’ ability completely free of charge. She received countless treatments where her doctors tried to make her healthy or make her comfortable. Unfortunately, Henrietta did not overcome her cancer, and her body died. But the cells collected by the doctors at Johns Hopkins and analyzed by George Gey made her immortal. The part of Henrietta Lacks that killed her will perhaps live on so long as humans live – not just in legend, but in tubes that sell for twenty-five dollars a piece. Henrietta and her family may never get compensated for the cells that changed the world as we know it, but Henrietta said, at least “her pain would come to some good for someone” (Skloot 66).

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Works Cited:

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