Kylee Sullivan

Montserrat: Math Over Time

Professor Little

September 10, 2010

**Henrietta Lacks: A Debate Over Ethics**

 Henrietta Lacks, a poor, uneducated African-American woman grew up during the 1950’s, a time which most Americans today view as unethical. Henrietta was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951, and although doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital used all the standard procedures of the time in an attempt to quell her cancer, she fell victim to it and died. Doctors at the hospital took a sample of Henrietta’s cancer tissue without her or her family’s consent. Since her death, Henrietta’s cells, commonly known as “HeLa” cells, have helped doctors and researchers worldwide make important strides in genetics and science. Author, Rebecca Skloot, decided write a book titled, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, to give Henrietta much-deserved fame for her cells. In her book, Skloot interviews both Henrietta’s family and researchers, almost all of whom bring up arguments concerning the ethics used-or disregarded- by the doctors who treated Henrietta. Americans today look back at history in hindsight and are repulsed by how “unethical” people were during specific time periods. However, the problem with looking back in time like this is that during the present time, the ethics were sensible and justifiable. Ever since the public learned about the story behind the HeLa cells, there have been many arguments concerning the ethics of the doctors who took her cells from her without her knowledge.

 On October 4th, 1951, Day Lacks received a call from Johns Hopkins Hospital asking if he could come down to identify his dead wife, Henrietta. While in the morgue, doctors asked Day for permission to do an autopsy on Henrietta. After some hesitation, Day finally agreed to allow them to complete an autopsy procedure on her. Skloot states in her book: “though no law or code of ethics required doctors to ask permission before taking tissue from a living patient, the law made it very clear that performing an autopsy or removing tissue from the dead without permission was illegal” (Skloot, p.89). The doctors did not reject any code of ethics while treating Henrietta. While doctors were removing tumors from Henrietta’s body, they did not tell her that in the process they also took samples of both her regular and cancer infected cells to use in research. Even though it would have been a nice gesture to have mentioned this to Henrietta, or even her family, it was not required of the doctors.

It was characteristic of the time period for African-Americans to be treated with less respect by White people. But not just in hospitals; America was still a segregated country with racism present in everyday life. As a whole, the treatment of African-Americans was unethical compared to today’s standards. But, at the time it was law. Even though African-Americans were looked down upon, doctors at Johns Hopkins still treated them when they were ill. “Before Henrietta left the hospital, a doctor put her feet in the stirrups again and removed the radium. He sent her home with instructions to call the clinic if she had problems, and to come back for a second dose of radium in two and a half weeks.” (Skloot, p. 40). Henrietta was fortunate enough to live reasonably close to a hospital that did not immediately turn Colored patients away and refuse to treat them. As far as treating Henrietta, the doctors at Johns Hopkins used all of the standard procedures with the most advanced technology to try to cure her of cervical cancer. The rooms in the “Colored Wing” might not have been nice as those in the “White Wing,” but that was the way of life back in the 1950’s.

The only unethical procedure that doctors executed while treating Henrietta was failing to telling her that the radium doses that she was given, which killed some of her malignant cells, would make her infertile. “In Henrietta’s medical record, one of her doctors wrote: ‘Told she could not have any more children. Says if she had been told so before, she would not have gone through with treatment.’ But by the time she found out, it was too late.” (Skloot, p.47-48). It was law to tell a patient of the potential risks of specific medical treatments back in 1951, and it still is today.

After learning about the widespread use of Henrietta’s cells in medical research, Henrietta’s family was enraged. Even though they could not comprehend the whole story and had trouble grasping the scientific details, they felt, and still feel today, that they were entitled to know because they were family. Unfortunately, according to law, doctors do not have to tell patients and their family if they are using their cells for research. On the other hand, around the same time, there were numerous unethical medical testing being carried out by doctors. In fact, Henrietta’s eldest daughter, Elsie, was one of many patients to be victimized and abused by their doctors. Elsie was mentally challenged and as a result Henrietta sent her to a Colored mental hospital with the hope that she would be treated.

“The Crownsville that Elsie died in was far worse than anything Deborah [Henrietta’s other daughter] had imagined…scientists often conducted research on patients there without their consent, including one study titled ‘Pneumoencephalographic and skull X-ray studies in 100 epileptics’…. Pneumoencephalography involved drilling holes into the skulls of research subjects, draining the fluid surrounding their brains, and pumping air or helium into the skull in place of the fluid to allow crisp X-rays of the brain through the skull. The side effects- crippling headaches, dizziness, seizures, vomiting-lasted until the body naturally refilled the skull with spinal fluid, which usually took two to three months.” (Skloot, p. 275-276).

In addition to the mistreatment of patients at Crownsville, doctors were abusing their power all around the world. Another example of unethical and illegal treatment during the mid-20th century is the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment where doctors injected syphilis into African-American patients without them knowing. Dr. Chester Southam experimented similarly with one of his cancer patients as he injected doses of saline solution mixed with HeLa cells into her arm to see if cancer was caused by a virus or a deficiency in a person’s immune system. Unfortunately, Dr. Southam hid the fact that he was injecting HeLa’s malignant cells into her body and only told her that he was testing her immune system.

Experiments such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment are both illegal and unethical. However, there are some situations in life when something that is legal can also be unethical. Dr. Southam also experimented with Ohio State Penitentiary prisoners. But, this time Southam wrote a newsletter seeking “25 volunteers for cancer research” (Skloot, p. 128). Over 100 prisoners gave Southam consent to conduct cancer research on them. Legally, Southam had the right to test these prisoners by injecting cancer into their arms because they gave him consent. But regardless of legal aspects, this experiment conflicts with a code of ethics. Even though Southam had the prisoners’ consent, he took advantage of the fact that they were prisoners and social outcasts and potentially gave them cancer just because he was curious to see what would happen. While prisoners said they gave consent for reasons such as, “’I believe the wrong I have done, in the eyes of society, this might make a right on it,’” Dr. Southam unethically took advantage of them. (Skloot, p. 129).

 Codes of ethics are, for the most part, objective. People hold different beliefs, and as culture changes over time, so do the ethics in that society. As a result, it is sometimes hard to look back on history and rationalize something as being unethical. The reason for this is because at the time, actions that are unethical to today’s standards might have been justifiable back then. But in other cases, ethics survive cultural changes and stay the same over time. Henrietta Lacks’s cells were taken from her body without her consent or knowledge, but neither of which was required, and still are not required, under law for a doctor to tell his or her patient. In comparison to other scientific research conducted by doctors back in the 1950’s, the medical treatment Henrietta received was immensely superior. After failing to cure her of cancer using the time period’s most advanced treatment, doctors cloned her cells and used them to make astonishing discoveries in science. Researchers and Henrietta’s family alike argue about the ethics used while treating Henrietta when in reality they should recognize the impact the cells have made in science over the past half a century.

**Works’ Cited**

Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Crown Publishing Group. New York City, New York. 2009.