Peter Zona September 10, 2010

Ethical Standards at the Time of Henrietta Lacks

In the narrative *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot discusses the ethical standards of the field of medicine as well as the relationship between doctors and their patients in the United States over the last century. When Henrietta Lacks was being treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital in the early 1950s, doctors were not required by law to receive the consent of the patient before performing treatments or tests. This led many doctors and researchers to perform unnecessary tests and experiments on their patients in the name of scientific discovery. However, just because something is legal, it is not necessarily reasonable or ethical. Skloot is able to convey the standards of the time and explain how these standards have evolved through the story of Henrietta Lacks and her immortal cells.

During her time at Johns Hopkins Hospital, the doctors that took care of Henrietta Lacks treated her according to high ethical standards. They were interested in curing her of her cervical cancer and took the necessary measures to do so. While removing the cancer cells, however, the doctors also removed a small sample of normal tissue cells for laboratory testing. Both samples were expected to die within a few days, but this was not the case. “As long as they had food and warmth, Henrietta’s cancer cells seemed unstoppable.” (Skloot, p. 41) The cancer cells continued to grow and even thrive therefore allowing some of the greatest discoveries in the history of medical science to occur over the next several decades. These cells came to be known as the HeLa cells. Since there were no laws preventing doctors from taking these samples and because the removal of these cells did no harm to the patient, there was nothing unethical or unreasonable about the way that Henrietta was treated. While the normal cells were taken without her permission or knowledge, the doctors only wanted to cure her of her cancer and at the same time take the opportunity to learn more about the differences between cancer cells and normal tissue cells. The doctors should have informed her of their actions but were not required to and did not want to scare her away when she so desperately needed their help. Based on her medical history, Henrietta would only go to see the doctor in times of emergency such as when she waited five years before having anything done about a toothache. Skloot describes a list of these untreated conditions on page 16 of the narrative. While it may have appeared that the doctors eventually killed Henrietta from the radiation, they were merely doing what they could to save her. The treatment failed because the doctors slightly misdiagnosed the disease.

At about the same time as when Henrietta was battling cervical cancer, many other studies and tests were being done both in the United States and around the world that certainly went against the rights of the patients. One example of this was the Tuskegee Experiment. This was an experiment that was sanctioned by the United States Department of Public Health. It dealt with a few hundred African American men who were infected with syphilis. Researchers watched and studied these men as they slowly died. While these “research subjects… were poor and uneducated” (Skloot, p. 50), the researchers knew that they could have been easily cured with penicillin. These poor African American men were given incentives to be a part of the study. About forty years went by before the news of this study reached the ears of the public spreading horror throughout the African American communities. There were even some rumors that the doctors injected some of the men with syphilis solely for the purpose of their study. Another test that was being done around that same time was known as the Mississippi Appendectomies. These were unnecessary hysterectomies meant to keep poor African American women from reproducing and at the same time give young doctors a chance to practice performing the procedure. These two experiments clearly abused the rights of the patients and could give reason for any African American to fear seeing a doctor unless the reasoning was an absolute emergency as was the case for Henrietta Lacks.

Throughout the narrative, Rebecca Skloot focuses on the topic of what is legal as opposed to what is ethical. These two subjects oftentimes conflict. In the case of Henrietta Lacks, it was unethical for the doctors to remove the normal tissue cells without her consent but it was not illegal. In addition, the Lacks family should have been notified that it was their relative that was doing so much for the good of the world. Another example of something that is unethical but not illegal is the money that was exchanging hands because of the HeLa cells. The doctors, scientists, and researchers were making a great deal of money while the person responsible for all of their discoveries was getting no credit at all. For many years it was believed that the cells were donated by a woman named Helen Lane. The Lacks family should have been able to make at least a small portion of the profit made because of those cells and at least get some recognition. Nevertheless, as Skloot says in the afterword on page 315, to this day doctors are allowed to take a person’s cells without that person’s knowledge and use those cells for research. It seems that ethics are more of a personal code that is engrained within each person at birth and develops over the course of that person’s life through experiences while what is legal is based on a set of rules to protect people’s rights.

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a narrative about the life of the person and the family responsible for so many of the greatest advances in medicine over the past sixty years. Throughout this work, Rebecca Skloot describes the injustices that have been done to the Lacks family as well as the question of whether or not the legality of something makes it ethical. She uses examples from the lives of Henrietta and her relatives and also describes other experiments that had been done to African Americans during the same time period. In sum, Henrietta was treated both reasonably and ethically based upon the views and laws of the time.