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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Studying science textbooks in class, it is very unlikely that anyone of us can find any ethical standards or moral values being taught there. Biology for example teaches us about the life processes of our body, like cell division and cell mutation. Chemistry reveals the chemical processes at work in our body that helps us to live and grow. Finally, physics expands our view further through mathematical calculations and simplifies objects by compressing them to dots to study motion and position of the objects. When looking at pictures of cells and organs, or even diagrams of the human body also, we often do not associate them to a live person, but instead we just view it in parts as we have been taught to view it through science. Altogether, we are not often taught about the ethics in science.

In the story **The Immortal Life of Henrietta** Lacks by Rebecca Lacks, Mary (Gey’s assistant) had once stated, “When I saw those toenails… it hit me for the first time that those cells we’d been working with …they came from a live woman. I’d never thought of it that way,” (Skloot p. 91). This shows that she did not seem to see the humanity in those cells, but instead only viewed them as how they had been mostly presented to her as just cells that she was trying to cultivate.

So, what ethical standards can scientists and researchers learn from science? According to accounts of research projects done on humans like the Tuskegee syphilis study which killed hundreds of African-American men (Skloot p. 50), or the experiments done in mental institutions like Crownsville where Elsie (Henrietta’s daughter) was admitted to, when humans were treated as test subjects of science, ethical standards oftentimes did not seem correlate with science, at least back in those days.

In the Tuskegee syphilis study, conducted in the thirties, hundreds of African-American victims of the disease were recruited as test subjects (Skloot p. 50). They were given incentives such as free physical exams and hot meals which lured them into the study, but what happened to a lot of them afterwards was not something science can be proud of even if new discoveries were made from it. To watch them suffer and die, especially when penicillin was found to be the cure was unethical and corrupted no matter what time period it was in or what law made it legal.

Crownsville, the metal institution, also was not a safe place for patients. Those suffering from conditions such as dementia and tuberculosis did not have the ability to defend themselves and were used in experiments. One of them was Pneumoencephalography, in which doctors drilled into skulls of the subjects to drain the fluids from their brains for X-rays (Skloot p. 275). The side effects of these were found to be dizziness, seizures, vomiting, and possibly permanent brain damage.

The end results were that scientists would gain greater knowledge of the conditions that could help them to establish new treatments or methods to help society. These studies were for the betterment of science. At least that is how most scientists and researchers would defend themselves. In most cases they seemed to believe they were acting according to high ethical standards, but is damaging the lives of thousands of people for that one cure or new discovery that can help save others ethical?

These are some of the issues raised in **The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks** by Rebecca Skloot. The story of Henrietta Lacks reveals many of the corruptions in the medical practices mentioned above. At the time where there was no law in the U.S. requiring doctors to get consent from patients for many experimentation and treatments and when the Nuremburg Code, which were ten-points of ethic that existed in science, was not required to follow or taught to doctors (Skloot p. 131), doctors had a lot of control over their patients. In particular, they could do experiments on them without their knowledge or consent.

In Henrietta’s case, she was kept in the dark about her cells being cultivated, but this problem only seemed minor compare to the other studies. On the day of her first treatment, Dr. Wharton Jr. sliced two dime-sized pieces of sample of tissue from Henrietta’s cervix for George Gey to experiment on. The cell culturing was a success and this would help to launch a new era of medical advances in science, but Hopkins and Gey did not get any profit from it. “Gey’s history indicates that he wasn’t particularly interested in science for profit: in the early 1940s he’d turned down a research to create and run the first commercial cell-culture lab.” (Skloot p. 193). In fact, he gave the samples out for free to scientists that needed them for their research. This action indicates that Gey had acted according to the high ethical standard and not out of greed for money.

Henrietta’s treatment at Hopkins at the time was also reasonable. Radium, although it can kill cancer cells, today we know can cause cell mutation that can lead to cancer. When it was discovered by Marie and Pierre Curie in France however, some scientists would even carry the harmful substance in their pockets (Skloot p. 32). In several studies conducted in the 1940s, it was even found to be a safer and more effective treatment for battling with cancer. So, given with what they were taught and knew, the doctors did what they thought would work and they gave her the treatments. So, there are some ethics when it comes to science.

What all of these studies mentioned above have in common however was how impersonal the doctors and researchers were to the patients’ humanity. Some of them seemed to view them as test subjects; injecting them with formulas containing cancer cells many times without their consent and sometimes even trying killing them, while others just did what they were hired to do. On the less serious matter is on tissue taken from the human body. In the ruling of the Supreme Court of California, tissues removed from the body were stated to be, “abandon[ed] as waste, and anyone can take your garbage and sell it.” (Skloot p.203) Such ruling shows how scientists and researchers can, as Robert Stevenson had stated, “…disassociate…materials from the people they come from…,” in order to make it much easier to do science (Skloot p. 216). This seems to be a common view among all the sciences such as chemistry and biology.