Muhammad Aqib Javaid

Professor John Little

10 September 2010

Mont-108N

For Science

“‘Let’s face it,’ Southam responded, ‘there are relatively few skilled cancer researchers, and it seemed stupid to take even the little risk’” (Skloot, p.134). The doctor, Southam, found it perfectly fine to inject cancer into already sick patients but when asked, why not inject himself, he responds with the quote mentioned above. He realizes that injecting even the slightest amount of cancer into the body can have seriously consequential effects. “He told them [his patients] he was testing their immune systems; he said nothing about injecting them with someone else’s malignant cells” (Skloot, p.128). During the 1950s testing different things on patients was considered normal by many health professionals. In the Tuskegee syphilis studies, researchers watched African Americans die from syphilis, to benefit science when a cure (Penicillin) already existed. These highly distinguished researchers had not even the slightest regard of human lives and used no consent whatsoever or even tell the patients what was *actually* being done to them.

In the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot, Skloot showed in great detail what kind of morality and ethics existed in the mentality of researchers. It was normal for doctors to take anything they found useful from patients without informing or asking for permission. Henrietta Lacks had invasive cervical cancer and was to undergo surgery and start radium treatment to cure her. The consent form that she had to sign in order for surgery to take place had no mention of cutting a piece of her normal tissue and a piece of her tumor. She was uneducated and had no understanding of what she was signing in the first place. I believe that Henrietta Lacks was not treated reasonably. In the 1950s whites had much higher precedence than the African Americans who went to Johns Hopkins in order to receive free care. White patients received better care and thorough examinations in earlier stages of diseases while African Americans were often not treated until a disease had entered a much later stage. Additionally Henrietta Lacks was misdiagnosed of her cancer, the correct cancer was invasive, but doctors had identified it as non-invasive. It was not until a much later time that a doctor from Hopkins posted in a magazine and admitted then the cancer was misdiagnosed. She was not informed that her reproductive system was going to be permanently disabled. Doctors without her knowing performed a task for which she probably would have denied permission. I believe that the doctors who were treating Henrietta were not acting according to high ethical standards of any time. I don’t believe that there are ethical standards of a particular time. A sense of ethics is something you are born with and that seldom changes over time. A classmate of mine mentions that ethics and morality aren’t different for any background, because as you can see in the world today, everyone has similar ethical principles. We all know that killing someone is wrong, that didn’t change over time, and it was embedded in us since birth. What the doctors were doing to their patients was immoral and just flat out wrong. You cannot just inject someone with cancer and have no proper justifications; in fact there is no possible way to have a proper justification, like Southham said, “it seemed stupid to take even the little risk” (Skloot, p.134).

In an instance in the book, Mary Kubicek a researcher at Johns Hopkins, displays to me a lack of ethics and humanity. When she watched the autopsy of Henrietta and looked at her red painted toe nails and said this: “‘When I saw those toenails,’ Mary told me years later, ‘I nearly fainted. I thought, *Oh jeez, she’s a real person…*..” (Skloot, p.91). This to me showed that Mary, a well educated person didn’t think of another person as *real.* Was it just because she was colored? How can another human say that someone else isn’t a real person? To me this showed a lack of ethics on part of Mary. It just seemed wrong to me how a person can just violate the rights of another person and no feel anything.

The doctors at Johns Hopkins had told Day, the husband of Henrietta, “.. they wanted to run tests that might help his children someday.”(Skloot, p.90). By performing an autopsy, they took her vital organs including the kidneys, the liver and the heart engulfed in tumors. But this process never helped his children, and they were all just taken advantage of later on in their lives as well. It just seems so cruel to me that while research on her cells was going on and advancing science no one ever told Henrietta’s family about the contributions that came from their mother’s cells. If there was nothing legally or ethically wrong being done why couldn’t the HeLa cell’s human name be disclosed. This shows that the doctors were indeed aware that Henrietta and her family were being abused of their rights. Just like in the case of Southam, he had no trouble injecting patients with cancer but would never want to inject himself. How can someone be so cruel, if you knew yourself that this injection could essentially kill you, why would anyone go to such a shameful level and inject people who couldn’t even say no.

“At some point not long before his death, he told his former assistant Mary Kubicek that it was fine to release Henrietta’s name if anyone asked, since it had been so many years.” (Skloot, p.171-172). George Gey the first researcher who grew the HeLa cell to immortality allowed the press release of the name behind HeLa only when he knew there wasn’t much time left in his life. Why did he do it at such a point in time? Gey must have been partly ashamed of what he had done to Henrietta and her family; he must have understood it was wrong and unethical. Deceiving the Lacks family to such an extent that they find out that their mother’s cells are still alive twenty plus years after her death is extremely devastating. There are times when what is ethical and what is legal conflict with each other. In the story of Henrietta Lacks, it was legal at the time for George Gey to mass produce and give HeLa cells to any and all researchers. But at the same time it was unethical for Henrietta and her family to be unaware of what had happened. There is no excuse for making a family suffer so much in their lifetime, finding out twenty years later that their mother helped progress science to such an amazing level and have no monetary help while others made billions.