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Math Across Time

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

In 1951, a woman named Henrietta Lacks went into Johns Hopkins Hospital to be treated for cervical cancer. While undergoing treatment, doctors cut dime-sized slivers of her tumor to study, the beginnings of what would later be known as the HeLa cell line, famous for its ability to regenerate endlessly and thus, live forever. Henrietta’s treatment followed the usual procedures that era, with doctors failing to inform their patients when they took cells out of their bodies,(which still occurs today), or not explaining how certain treatments worked. In fact, most doctors and scientists ignored the oaths placed upon them, never once worrying about getting consent from their patients prior to any sort of treatment or testing. Many patients were misinformed and, as a result, sometimes signed up for far more than they bargained for.

During the 1940s and 1950s, most doctors didn’t follow any sort of ethical code in dealing with informing patients about their illness, the treatments involved, or subjecting them to special testing that had nothing to do with their condition. While the Hippocratic Oath did still hold sway in the medical world, most doctors regarded it more as a set of guidelines rather than laws to be upheld. Even the then-recent creation of the Nuremberg Codes, which governed all human experiments across the globe, failed to merit much attention; any mention of the codes was made in civil courts to try scientists for whether they acted, “within the ethical boundaries of the profession”(Skloot, 132). This lax view towards ethical codes allowed doctors to use radical treatments to deal with certain illnesses.

In dealing with Henrietta’s case though, doctors gave her what was then considered to be the norm in treating cancer: radium. The process, in Henrietta’s case, involved placing radium inside, outside, and against her cervix to directly kill the cancer. Placing rolls of gauze near by to hold the radium and a catheter, “so she could urinate without disturbing the treatment” (Skloot, 33) followed this. Although she received the “proper” treatment and seemed healthy at the time of her release, Henrietta would suffer not only from the side effects of radium treatment and her own tumors, but also from a lack of information.

Aside from the doctors cutting tissue samples, “one from her tumors, and one from the healthy cervix tissue nearby”(Skloot, 33), there were also radical side effects from the radium treatment used to rid Henrietta of her tumors. The most noticeable, after several trips to John Hopkins for radiation treatments, was that the skin from her breasts to her pelvis had been, “charred a deep black”(Skloot, 48). On a more emotional level for Henrietta, the radium treatments also left infertile, something that upset her greatly. Her personnel file even said that, “if she had been told so before, she would not have gone through with treatment” (Skloot, 48), though certain records claim that she had indeed been informed. Miscommunication or no communication at all from doctors to patients led to similarly unfortunate outcomes for many people.

In Henrietta’s time, doctors didn’t feel the need to ask patients for consent to treatments or testing. In fact, with many institutions similar to John Hopkins, doctors viewed testing on certain patients as compensation for the free medical care that they received. In addition, many black patients came from poor background with barely a middle school education much less a medical degree. This meant that they tended to simply nod their heads to what the doctors were saying, sign the forms, and move on with their lives, having no idea that they might be walking away sicker than they were previously.

Doctors had very few issues injecting people with different diseases because, much like with Chester Southam using HeLa injections to see if they could infect those working with the cells, such experiments were said to be done in the name of scientific discovery. One of the worst cases was the Tuskegee syphilis study, where researchers recruited hundreds of syphilis-infected men to watch the slow, agonizing progression of the disease, even when researchers had discovered that penicillin injections could stop the virus. A majority of these subjects were poor blacks, who joined the study in order to receive the incentives offered to them and their families through the study. It wasn’t until the 1970s that any information was made known about the experiment, by which point hundreds of people had suffered needlessly painful deaths all in the name of science.

The line between what is ethical and what is legal was very often blurred in early scientific research. Yet despite the numerous problems that occurred in the medical world at that time, Henrietta Lacks seems to have been treated fairly well by her doctors, an abnormality for a black woman in the South. How doctors treated her, at least for a majority of the time, was a prime example of how all patients should have been cared for by doctors at the time and the progression to how they are treated now.