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Math Across Time

9 September 2010

The Wild West of the Medical World

The consent form Henrietta signed that gave away her famous cells to research states that Johns Hopkins can “perform any operative procedures and under any anesthetic that they may deem necessary in the proper surgical care treatment of Henrietta Lacks” (Skloot, p. 31). But what constitutes a necessary procedure? Can a doctor practice a risky procedure on you without consent if he deems it necessary? This exemplifies the power and freedom that doctors possessed over their patients. Patients were extremely vulnerable up until this time and everything was placed in the good hands of the doctor. This explains both the common practice of “benevolent deception” (Skloot, p. 63) of patients, as seen in the case of Henrietta, and also the outright abuses of patients, as seen by the Dr. Southam cancer case. Thus, certain questionable actions taken by the doctors in the story, the treatment of Henrietta Lacks, and the clear medical abuses raised in the book stem from the fact that doctors held complete control and freedom to pursue whatever they desired with their patients.

The doctors treatment of Henrietta is two- sided. On one side Henrietta was clearly taken advantage of as a patient. The book states that “like most patients in the 1950’s, she deferred to anything her doctors said” (Skloot, p.63). As a result, when it came time to take her cells she was easily manipulated. Skloot states that “no one had told Henrietta that TeLinde was collecting samples or asked if she wanted to be a donor – Wharton picked up a sharp knife and shaved two dime size pieces of tissue from her cervix” (Skloot, p.33). This illustrates the ease in which doctors could take advantage of their patients. It was not required for doctors convey any information to their patients when they were doing an additional procedure such as taking someone’s cells for research. On the other side, you could argue that the doctors should be forgiven for taking advantage of Henrietta because they were doing it for the right reasons. A great example of this idea is the radium testing that the doctors performed on Henrietta. The book states that “Henrietta didn’t know that the treatments had left her infertile” (Skloot, p.47). However, the book also states that “she would not have gone through with treatment” (Skloot, p.48) had she known that the radium treatment would not allow her have another baby. The doctors were aware of the seriousness of Henrietta’s cancer and knew that receiving radium testing was paramount for Henrietta’s recovery. Thus, the doctors withheld certain important information from Henrietta for the purpose of her going through with the procedure and receiving the treatment that she so desperately needed. The treatment of Henrietta is clearly two- sided. On one side the doctors mistreated Henrietta and on the other side the doctors had Henrietta’s best interest at heart. Thus, it is hard to either condone or condemn the actions taken by the doctors when treating Henrietta.

Howard Jones, Henrietta’s doctor, claims that “Henrietta got the same care any white patient would have; the biopsy, the radium treatment, and radiation were all standard for the day” (Skloot, p.64). However, the book also states that “black patients were treated and hospitalized at later stages of their illnesses than white patients” (Skloot, p.64). I believe there is some textual evidence that shows some negligence regarding the treatment of Henrietta. Many times Henrietta was simply sent home after complaining to the doctors about discomfort. Moreover, when Henrietta could not urinate they simply inserted a catheter to empty her bladder rather than trying to find out the root of the problem. From this, it is clear the doctors were not going above and beyond to help Henrietta. I believe the reason for this is based on her race and economic background. The book states that “many black patients were just glad to be getting treatment, since discrimination in hospitals was widespread” (Skloot, p.63). Also, Henrietta was not a “paying customer” in the minds of the doctors. To admit Henrietta as a patient in the hospital during early stages of her cancer would have cost money which the hospital did not want to spend on a patient who was not paying for treatment. Thus, I believe Howard Jones’ statements are false and Henrietta only received the treatment that was standard for people of her race and economic background.

The lack of regulation and absolute power possessed by the doctors up until this time did allow for some clear abuses of medical ethics. Similar to Wall Street, when a lack of regulation exists there always seems to be people who try to take advantage of the system. One can draw many comparisons between the actions of the financers who thought up the riskiest derivatives and mortgage-backed securities and those of Dr. Southam. Because there was very little regulation on the market, a group of smart financiers created what they thought would be a system that would lead to new wealth. Yet, their new system of derivatives and mortgage-backed securities was extremely complicated. Warren Buffet, the most successful investor in the world, is even quoted saying that he does not understand derivatives. Thus, many people lost huge sums of money because they were incapable of learning the new system. Dr. Southam desperately wanted to understand the way in which cancer works. For research, Southam would inject his patients with cancer and study its effects on the body. Because doctors held unquestionable authority over patients, Southam would simply tell his patients that “he was testing for cancer” (Skloot, p.130) and they would believe him. Both stories show people who have just causes but go about their work the wrong way. The financiers wanted to invent a system that would lead to new wealth and Dr. Southam wanted to better his understanding cancer and how it works. However, the just causes of both the financiers and Dr. Southam ended up hurting more people than it benefitted in the long run.

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* raises the question of ethics in the medical field. Many of the doctors in the story act wrongly and use deceit and power to obtain what they want. Although these actions cannot be justified, they can be better understood if you look at the time the events described took place. Up until this time doctors were granted excessive freedom and held the unconditional trust of their patients. This created an opening for doctors to exploit their power. That opening for doctors to take advantage of their patients explains the treatment of Henrietta and even more severely those patients who were injected with cancer.