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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, such as 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. Instead, we view them for what they are as just images or objects that we trying to examine. In the story **The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks** by Rebecca Skloot for example, Mary Kubiczek (Gey’s assistant) 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). Similarly to that aloof attitude, this is how most of us have been trained to view the materials we are dealing with in science as, as part of an experiment or a learning process. So, altogether we are not often taught about the ethical questions that arise in science.

So, what ethical standards can scientists and researchers learn from science? According to accounts from research projects done on humans such as 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, when humans were treated as test subjects of science, ethical standards did not seem correlate with science, at least back in those days.

In the Tuskegee syphilis study that began 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 which time period it was in or what law made it legal.

Crownsville, the mental 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 the 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**. The story of Henrietta Lacks reveals many of the same sorts of corruptions that arise in the medical practices mentioned above. At the time there was no law in the U.S. requiring doctors to get consent from patients for many forms of experimentation and treatments. The Nuremburg Code, which were ten-points of ethical standard that existed in science, was not required or taught to doctors (Skloot p. 131). So, 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 compared 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 who needed them for their research. This action indicates that Gey had acted according to a high ethical standard and not out of greed for money.

Henrietta’s treatment at Hopkins at the time was also reasonable. Although radium can kill cancer cells, today we know it can also cause cell mutations 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 cancer. So, given 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 about patients’ humanity. Some of them seemed to simply view their patients 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. A less serious matter concerns the 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) This 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.