

# The immortal life of henrietta lacks narrative essay

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In Rebecca Skloot's novel *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* many ethical questions are raised regarding the practices used to collect and distribute Henrietta's cells. These practices led to emotional challenges faced by each of Henrietta's family members and close friends. These ethical issues combined with the struggles faced such as poverty, trust and the lack of education by the Lacks' family contribute to the overall theme of the novel. Once Henrietta was diagnosed with cervical cancer, she was forced to undergo harsh radiation treatments in the hopes to battle the disease, which ultimately led to her demise.

Her family and friends watched her suffer without any knowledge of her cells being taken or continuing to live after her body had departed. The Lacks family, including Henrietta, trusted the doctors at Hopkins and never thought to question anything tests they needed to run or surgeries they asked to perform. The family was also very uneducated. When told her mother's cells were immortal and still living, Deborah as well as other Lacks began to think there were millions of Henriettas roaming the world.

The question of ethics, which reoccurs throughout the novel, was that of whether the doctors at John Hopkins should have asked for permission before collecting Henrietta's cells. Another question raised was whether the HeLa cells fame, should have been explained to the remaining Lacks' and whether or not the family was entitled to a portion of the profits. When Skloot came in touch with the family, she began to teach them about their mother and her cells; they were finally beginning to understand the nature of their mother's cells. The theme that had the largest impact on my reading of the novel was that of ethics.

The use of human cells without the knowledge of the patient is unethical especially when the education level and social class of that patient is used to the doctors advantage. There were several decisions made throughout the novel in which the family had no say, therefore they were made to the advantage of the decision maker. The initial sample taken from Henrietta's tumor is one of many examples. Henrietta thought that she was simply going in to have her cancer removed, when in fact her cells were removed and currently are still thriving.

The question of ethics did not come into play when the outcome benefited someone other than the patient. The nature in which Henrietta and her family were treated is very unethical. They were virtually left in the dark and the fame that Henrietta's cells received was never shared with the family. There are many different views on people's cells once they have been removed from the body. Whether or not I agree with these views would be enough for a paper itself. The novel written by Skloot gave Henrietta, her family, and her cells the proper place in history to which they deserve.