

The unethical approach to immortality

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Henrietta Lacks is, one of the greatest contributors medical science and research in the past century. Albeit, she never knew of her contribution. In fact, it took twenty years for her family to be informed about the extensive number of cells that had been produced, and that would continue to be produced, to further studies in the best medical interest of mankind. The ethics of this situation are hardly questionable and this is what "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" by Rebecca Skloot discusses.

The blatant use of Henrietta Lacks' tissue without her consent, while it was a huge benefit to the medical field and mankind, was highly unethical and the lack of consent from her and her family have led to the questioning of the moral standards of the medical field. We see Henrietta Lacks and her family as an example of the apathy that the medical field exhibits during this time towards underprivileged people and the lasting effects that it can have on society. The twentieth century was a rather confusing time for the medical field.

We were always advancing and consistently on the verge of new technological capabilities. The "medical revolution" that transpired during the twentieth century began to develop some unintended side effects though. Ethics began to take a back seat to the advancement of medical research and Henrietta Lacks fell victim to these unethical practices. When she discovered "her biopsy results from the pathology lab: Epidermoid carcinoma of the cervix, Stage I", she had the cancer removed. Henrietta was able to continue her life without a problem after the removal and thus continued her life as it was, previously to the cancer.

She did not know that the cancer had essentially been harvested, not fully removed, and used to produce the largest supply of cells in existence. After Henrietta Lacks' death, the use of her cells continued for years. They have been used as a medium for in vitro fertilization to polio vaccinations. One of the problems that make this situation questionable is the fact that Henrietta Lacks still died from this cancer. She was not helped but used as a genetic farm without knowing, until she expired. The other half of this situation is how Henrietta Lacks passed away which in this case, was excruciatingly painful.

The doctors viewed her as a "miserable specimen" and saw no need to examine her further. After Henrietta's death, word traveled quickly to the George Gey laboratory, where her cells were originally cultured. They froze her body and used it as a template to continue their research. They began mass producing her cells in a warehouse in Tuskegee at about twenty thousand vials per day. They began to profit off the production and tell not a word of it to Henrietta's family because they would be legally entitled to a portion of the profits.

Not only have they disgraced the body of Henrietta Lacks, they blatantly avoid telling the family about their activities after her death. In 1973, the Lacks family learned of their mother's past situation. They could not grasp the concept that the cells were not immortal but replicated millions of times over. However, it seemed to be that all the brothers, in the family, cared about was receiving a portion of the profits made off Henrietta's cells while the sisters were more concerned about how their mother's medical records got into the hands of strangers.

During this time, it was an upheld tenet that doctors practiced confidentiality with their patients but they were not legally obligated to do so. This moral dilemma plagued the twentieth century. Patients were only treated properly if they were high paying or highly regarded people of white ethnicity while everyone underneath them were seen as borderline guinea pigs for genetic testing. Henrietta Lacks' situation and death, along with her family's treatment regarding their mother, is a microcosm to the ethics and practices of the twentieth century.

People cannot be seen as guinea pigs, but as people that need treatment and help. It is the duty and responsibility of the medical field to uphold high moral and ethical standards and to maintain these standards. It appeared that, during the twentieth century, that the very people that medical field worked to help, were treated with little respect. Henrietta Lacks' ordeal will serve as a lesson to the medical field in terms of ethics and responsibility towards their patients.

References

1. Skloot.