

# Synopsis immortal life of henrietta lacks essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Immortal cells taken by a patient without their consent changed the medical world drastically. Not only was the polio vaccine influenced because of the HeLa cells, but research was also enhanced for cures on different illnesses around the world. How can what seems so unethical turn to be entirely beneficial to our world and our generation? *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* opens up the process of how these famous HeLa cells were discovered, and the story of the woman behind them. It reveals her family's side of the story and the debate on whether the discovery of HeLa was for profit or altruistic reasons.

Henrietta Lacks always felt like there was something wrong with her. She literally felt like there was a knot in her gut, and all along she was right; there was something horribly wrong with her. She had cancer and it wasn't long until she grew tumors in various parts of her body. She attended John Hopkins hospital for treatments of radium. During several visits and treatments, small tissue pieces were collected. Not only did doctors take two dime sized pieces of her cervical tissue from her, but also they took them without any consent.

Rebecca Skloot, the author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* exposes the history of HeLa, but also the story of Henrietta Lacks and her family. The story examines the HeLa cells discovery, and the ethical debate about taking any body products or parts without consent of the patient. The researchers who wanted the immortal cells wanted it for the reasons to cure cancer. The author goes in great detail about the laws in 1950's, and that there were none regarding researching without consent. The author argues that the country has always been market based, and that it always will be.

Products of all kinds will always be bought and sold. Rebecca Skloot went into great search for Henrietta's family. She wanted to uncover the woman behind the cells by getting both sides of the story. When she contacted Henrietta's family, they weren't very thrilled. Turns out, the Lacks family knew little about what their mother's cells did. They just knew they were important. The controversy with the family is they were never consented about what had happened to her mother or what her mother had done to the world. They wanted their mother to be accredited that those were her cells, and she was behind all of this.

It didn't help that down their journey, they were asked to give blood without the understanding of why. All their lives they were wondering what might be wrong with them, when really the blood was used to research with the cells but the family was never fully told that. The author tells the story from her past years of research, and the troubles she went through to receive this information. Growing immortal cells were highly desired by two researchers: Dr. George Gey and Richard Wesley TeLinde. The birth of HeLa cells started with the work of these two researchers and their desire of living cells to aid in research for cancer.

Dr. Gey was a head tissue-culture researcher at John Hopkins with a specific goal in mind. " Gey and his wife, Margeret, had spent the last three decades working to grow malignant cells outside the body, hoping to use them to find cancer's cause and cure" (Skloot 39). He had spent most of his time trying to grow cells outside of the body, which had all eventually died until TeLinde contacted him offering a supply of cervical cancer tissue to help with his

study. TeLinde was one of the top cervical cancer experts who planned a study to prove other people wrong.

Telinde thought if he could find a way to grow living samples from normal cervical tissue and both types of cancerous tissue-something never done before-he could compare all three. If he could prove that carcinoma in situ and invasive looked and behaved similarly in the laboratory, he could end the debate showing that he'd been right all along and doctors who ignored him were killing their patients" (Skloot 30). Their mutual goal came hand in hand. One would supply, and the other would produce. These two just wanted something to prove. They wanted to benefit other people in the world, and other doctors.

The doctor who examined Henrietta had shaved two dime sized pieces of her tissue-one from her tumor and the other from a healthy tissue, which was placed in glass dishes and sent to Dr Gey to grow and observe. In order to keep the cells successfully alive, they needed to be put into the perfect medium with the correct nutrients and must also avoid any sort of contamination. Sterility was a very important factor in order to prevent contamination in the cultures. Any dust particles or bacteria from the air, surfaces, or from humans could easily affect and ruin the cells.

Henrietta's tissues stayed alive, but nobody expected it. They also didn't expect them to double so quickly. Henrietta's cervix tissue were sliced into very small cubes, covered in medium, and placed at the bottom of chicken-blood clots. These tubes with the infamous cells were kept in an incubator, a controlled environment that keeps the cells sterile and alive. Gey's assistant

Mary thought Henrietta's cells were going to die, just like every other cell has. She had observed them for days, until one day there appeared to be fried egg whites on the bottom of the clots.

She split the cells into different clots and they were growing and doubling rapidly. They had to be split into several different tubes to be given more room to grow. As long as the cells were given the right nutrients and remained uncontaminated, they would live on and grow forever. These cells became so important and useful in research, everyone wanted to get their hands on them. "The reason Henrietta's cells were so precious was because they allowed scientists to perform experiments that would have been impossible with a living human" (Skloot 58).

HeLa cells were applied in many experiments. Researchers wanted to see what would happen to cells if they came in contact with toxins, drugs, or infections. By observing what would happen to these cells would explain what would happen to the any human cells. They would also use these cells to study cancer and how it suppressed the immune system with tumors.

What was great about these cells is that there is an endless supply.

Researchers and scientists can keep testing and experimenting without worrying about the supply of cells. HeLa cells were applied to cloning, gene mapping, and freezing.

What was once a part of a woman's cervical tissue had change the medical world. TeLinde collected samples from every woman who had cervical cancer. His patients had no idea that he was taking and using their tissues. To him, it was fair. "Many scientists believed that since patients were

treated for free in the public wards, it was fair to use them as research subjects as a form of payment” (Skloot 30). By helping them for free, a piece of their tissue was only fair to help him in return, which is exactly what he did with Henrietta Lacks.

No one had told her or asked her if she wanted to be a donor. They were not harming her, but were this okay because her tissue was used mainly for research purposes, and not for profit? Was this purely an altruistic act? Altruism is an unselfish act that will benefit others. TeLinde and Gey’s determination of these immortal cells were solely for research so they could prove something to the world. Although they did not consent Henrietta about taking her cells, it did no harm to her body and was a benefit to the world. TeLinde and Gey weren’t looking for any profit with these cells.

Gey was sending these cells for free out to other researchers around the world, in hopes that it will help them discover vaccines and cures to many illnesses. The main goal was to understand cells and cancer at a deeper extent. He never used profit to guide his research. He even built his own tools and technology with using scraps from the junkyard. He sent out his discovery without publishing anything because he was so focused on learning how to maintain the cells and hope to understand something with the. It wasn’t until the HeLa factory was created and profit was coming in.

The factory was producing trillions of HeLa cells for the purpose to research on polio. The poliovirus was becoming an epidemic, and there needed to be a way to stop it. HeLa cells were sent to various researchers, and they were beginning to understand viruses. They exposed HeLa to every virus they

could to study. HeLa became a business, making profits that started with little bits of cells. These cells would not only live on forever, but also never run out, which opened up a multibillion-dollar industry. Having profit to guide research can be beneficial in many ways.

Profit can buy the tools and technology needed to do effective research. Profit can buy supplies like medium, tools, microscopes, incubators, and test tubes. All these different kinds of materials can make a difference in research by increasing the affectivity. Because of the profit enabling the purchase of tools and technology, it also brings the feeling of motivation and prestige about something that can help the world. Although research guided from profit seems like a good idea, it also brings major risks. In the book, Gey didn't publish his work because he was always so busy.

When the companies had taken over the distribution of HeLa cells, he felt relieved but also felt like the cells he had discover were now out of his control. He wanted other scientists to use and research the cells in certain ways. He thought there was a lot of research he could have done by himself, but the other researchers didn't care. They thought he should have done his own research, put his name on it, and released it to the world before sharing the cells with everyone else. It was no longer his cells; it was open to the general public for everyone to explore. This is a common risk with profit.

Pharmaceuticals and other kinds of industries can invest in one's research, but then it's not only the researchers name, it is also the companies. This can bring a lot of problems with regards to who truly gets credit for the work, and if the work is concrete. A researcher might publish some work that is not

entirely true because they are forced to by the industry that's profiting them. Not only was Gey's situation a risk of letting profit guide research, but it was also an obstacle for him. There were other studies and experiments he could have done, but the fact that the cells were mass-produced by the industry- anyone can do what they want.

He wanted a better way to distribute HeLa cells, but could not be in control. He wanted these cells to research cancer cures, and even sent out the cells for free. It was a struggle now it was more widely spread. He didn't have the best of both worlds. I think many researches for altruistic reasons run into problems with resources and honesty Not having resources as an obstacle can tie along with profit because researchers cannot use quality tools and technology to help aid in their studies. Resources could also be a problem if they cannot be found for the study. Honesty is another problem.

Trying to conduct research to make the world a better place isn't always easy. This is because you have to be honest in what resources you need to conduct the research, and understand you can't always get them. Gey took Henrietta's cells without permission, but his purpose was altruistic. He wanted to cure cancer by studying off of immortal cells. If he were to be honest about taking them, he could have run into problems. Some people may be okay with him taking the cells, but some people would not. This leaves him a shortage of studies to use, which could affect his research or experiments.

Honesty plays a big issue because if the statement is too honest it could scare people away, but if the statement is less honest than it could turn



unethical. HeLa had changed the medical world in so many ways. It had influenced so many researchers, and is still alive and growing today. Although the discovery of where the HeLa cells really came from was unethical-they benefitted the world and was taken for the reasons to help others. Not only did the world learn about the lady behind the HeLa cells, but her family did too.