



The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks

(<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henrietta-lacks>)

H o n o r i n g H e n r i e t t a

In 1951, a young mother of five named Henrietta Lacks visited The Johns Hopkins Hospital complaining of vaginal bleeding. Upon examination, renowned gynecologist Dr. Howard Jones discovered a large, malignant tumor on her cervix. At the time, The Johns Hopkins Hospital was one of only a few hospitals to treat poor African-Americans.

As medical records show, Mrs. Lacks began undergoing radium treatments for her cervical cancer. This was the best medical treatment available at the time for this terrible disease. A sample of her cancer cells retrieved during a biopsy were sent to Dr. George Gey's nearby tissue lab. For years, Dr. Gey, a prominent cancer and virus researcher, had been collecting cells from all patients - regardless of their race or socioeconomic status - who came to The Johns Hopkins Hospital with cervical cancer, but each sample quickly died in Dr. Gey's lab. What Dr. Gey would soon discover was that Mrs. Lacks' cells were unlike any of the others he had ever seen: where other cells would die, Mrs. Lacks' cells doubled every 20 to 24 hours.

Today, these incredible cells — nicknamed "HeLa" cells, from the first two letters of her first and last names — are used to study the effects of toxins, drugs, hormones and viruses on the growth of cancer cells without experimenting on humans. They have been used to test the effects of radiation and poisons, to study the human

genome, to learn more about how viruses work, and played a crucial role in the development of the polio and COVID-19 vaccines.

Although Mrs. Lacks ultimately passed away on October 4, 1951, at the age of 31, her cells continue to impact the world.

Although these were the first cells that could be easily shared and multiplied in a lab setting, Johns Hopkins has never sold or profited from the discovery or distribution of HeLa cells and does not own the rights to the HeLa cell line. Rather, Johns Hopkins offered HeLa cells freely and widely for scientific research.

Johns Hopkins applauds and regularly participates in efforts to raise awareness of the life and story of Henrietta Lacks. Having reviewed our interactions with Henrietta Lacks and with the Lacks family over more than 50 years, we found that Johns Hopkins could have – and should have – done more to inform and work with members of Henrietta Lacks' family out of respect for them, their privacy and their personal interests. Though the collection and use of Henrietta Lacks' cells in research was an acceptable and legal practice in the 1950s, the laws protecting research subjects have evolved. We at Johns Hopkins have been supportive of legal changes since 1951 that protect research subjects, and we are compliant with these requirements, including those related to informed consent.

We are deeply committed to the ongoing efforts at our institutions and elsewhere to honor the contributions of Henrietta Lacks and to ensure the appropriate protection and care of the Lacks family's medical information.

Honoring Henrietta Lacks: Her Impact and Our Outreach

Henrietta Lacks Building

A new multidisciplinary building on the Johns Hopkins East Baltimore campus in honor of Henrietta Lacks, who was the source of the HeLa cell line that has been critical to numerous advances in medicine.

Lacks Building Updates (🔒://

