

**The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks**

Student's Name

Department, Institutional Affiliation

Course Name and Number

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Due Date

### Introduction

Western medicine made a lot of progress and breakthroughs in the 20th century. Most of this was because minority groups were ill-treated and used as research subjects. Many poor men and women have given their lives and health to medical progress without their knowledge or permission. Henrietta Lacks is one example. Under the guise of medical progress, the American Medical Establishment hurt Henrietta and other silent African American victims. The history of American medical research is tainted, thus, affecting how African Americans see and use our medical institutions today. This article examines how the system facilitates oppression through power and privilege.

### Systems of Oppression

The issues of sexism, social inequalities, and discrimination in the United States are essential to comprehending Lack's story. Racism is a widespread system of power based on the societal constructivism of race, or ideas that white people are better than other races, which unfairly disadvantages people of color (Jones, 2018). Henrietta, a poor and uneducated black woman, had almost no control over her medical treatment throughout her life. David transported Henrietta more than 25 kilometers to Hopkins, not because they enjoyed the journey but because it was the only large hospital in the surrounding area that served black patients. Skloot offers this crucial background information to provide context for Henrietta's narrative and warn us that institutionalized prejudice is still prevalent. Today, segregation is unlawful; however, Henrietta was diagnosed in 1951, when segregated amenities were standard in the south. It is not clear if Henrietta's treatment at Hopkins was influenced by her color, but it is evident that the legacy of racism continues to impact African American communities. They must deal with the fallout from racism's long history. While Skloot acknowledges that it is impossible

to tell if Henrietta received worse treatment because of her race, she does show that every effort was made to ease Henrietta's suffering (Skloot, 2010, p. 64). Nonetheless, the averages show a lot about how race may affect the success rate of conventional treatment.

Skloot puts Henrietta's story in the larger context of other historical examples of scientific racism. It helps the audience understand the Lack's family worries and shows that dehumanizing black patients is still a problem in the U.S. White people thought they were superior to black people. This motivated white doctors to carry out cruel experiments on enslaved Black people. Both the Tuskegee syphilis experiment and the research done by Hopkins on criminality in Baltimore's black children hurt patients and violated their rights. They were also based solely on experiments, and the legacy of white supremacy continued to affect medical practice. While Howard Jones and others claim that Henrietta's color had no impact on her care, the historical background of scientific racism makes their claims seem dubious. Many physicians in the 20th century thought it was only suitable to use patients from public hospitals as study subjects as reimbursement for the care they provided. Jones submits that the public wards attended to many people from the vast, impoverished black neighborhood close to Hopkins. It is safe to assume that Henrietta and other African-Americans experienced disproportionate harm due to the widespread practice of obtaining cell cultures from patients without their permission.

### Power

Skloot reflects on how individuals are conditioned to defer to authoritative figures and analyses the pernicious implications of blind obedience. Deborah and Sonny's academic success was hindered since they never notified their instructors that they had hearing problems. They followed their parents' advice to be quiet and never challenge authority. Day is reluctant to contradict the authority of a white practitioner and has been taught not to question doctors, so he

assumes he cannot confront McKusick concerning the blood samples. Lacks family is frightened and confused, and Day's respect for McKusick does not help. Instead of laying blame at the feet of those who find themselves on the receiving end of this dynamic, Skloot paints a picture of compelled respect as a systemic fault and illustrates that the powerless have good reason to be wary of speaking out against the status quo. John Moore claims he felt he had no option but to sign the permission form at UCLA. He did so without questioning his physicians. As a result of their persistent questioning of those in charge, the Lacks kids often receive negative consequences. Day had every right to be afraid of confronting Hopkins due to the massive power gap between black and white professionals.

### Privilege

What happened to Henrietta is especially egregious because of the substantial racialized poverty in which the Lacks family lives. By the middle of the 20th century, it had become standard practice to use human subjects in scientific studies without their knowledge or permission. During her treatment, neither Henrietta nor her loved ones knew her cells would be harvested. Before seeing a doctor at Hopkins, individuals had to sign a paper permitting them to undergo whatever treatment the doctor considered necessary (Skloot, 2010, p. 31). Hopkins' written consent policy may seem progressive, but it is an example of a policy with racial underpinnings. Rodems and Shaefer (2016) explain how such policies are frequently disguised as equality. Like many low-income African Americans who lived in urban industrial or rural agricultural areas, they could not understand the Hopkins permission forms, continuing a historical trend. Even if a patient could read, the complex medical language was sometimes beyond their comprehension; this was the case with Henrietta, whose only experience with a cell was in jail. This form's apparent flaw is that it provides physicians free rein to treat patients as

they see fit without obtaining more consent. It includes taking samples of the patient's cells or body without consulting them further, giving the experimental patient treatments, and making it harder for the patient to get painkillers.

The Lacks family could not afford a lawyer, as pointed out by Skloot when she is talking about the case that John Moore filed over his cells. Not only has the rest of the globe benefited from HeLa cells but so has the Lacks family not been able to pay for the many medical bills related to their illnesses, which have been made worse by their ethnic poverty.

### References

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