REALHEALTH™

Bioethical Considerations

More than 60 years after her death, Henrietta Lacks is recognized by scientists as an unwitting hero in HIV research.

December 4, 2013 By Kate Ferguson

When author Rebecca Skloot first heard about the HeLa cell line in biology class, she also learned that people knew little about the cell source, a woman named Henrietta Lacks. Because these cells could grow in Petri dishes, scientists all over the world used them to study a number of diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Eventually, these HeLa cells helped researchers determine what was required for HIV to infect a cell.

But scientific use of HeLa cells sparked a controversy when Lacks's descendants learned the cells were taken without Henrietta's or her family's permission. The cells were from a tissue sample doctors saved when Lacks died in 1951 of cervical cancer at age 31.

Just recently, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) crafted an agreement that recognizes Lacks and her family's contributions to science. The agreement also gives researchers only controlled access to data derived from HeLa cell research.

Says Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD, and NIH director, "I'm glad that we now have a chance to thank the Lacks family for continuing to share her enduring legacy with the biomedical community."

In 2010, Skloot published an award-winning book titled The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks about Lacks and her family's search for the truth about her death-defying cells. And director Alan Ball has teamed with Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Films to produce an HBO film based on the story.

---

http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/bioethical-considerations-24873-4780