

## *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot

By Maria Kootsikis, Pharm.D.

I read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* when it was first published in 2010. I just re-read it (and I never re-read books) and believe the book had an even greater impact on me this time. The story is very well-researched and strongly intertwined with Mrs. Lacks' family and how they were affected once they learned that cells were taken from their mother without her knowledge. In 1951, she died at the age of 31 from cervical cancer and her cells are still alive today, having recently celebrated their 100th birthday.

Mrs. Lacks' cells are commonly referred to by the acronym HeLa, for the first two initials of her first and last names. HeLa has helped so many people over the years, including (as just one example) the development of the polio vaccine, and is cited in over 110,000 medical publications from at least 140 countries. HeLa has become an integral part of medical research for the development of new drug therapies and, unfortunately, in some cases, for financial gain. When cells are removed from a human body, they can be kept alive if frozen and properly cared for, but that doesn't mean they are "alive and growing" like the HeLa cells. Within a certain amount of time, normal human cells typically run out of steam or telomeres, which are required to maintain the integrity of our 46 chromosomes (which were discovered with the help of HeLa) and the P53 genes (a suppressor gene causing cells to stop growing). HeLa cells are an anomaly; they just keep on going. HeLa cells do not run out of telomeres and "her" P53 genes never turn off. HeLa cells do not die; they are immortal. Thus, the title *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

Mrs. Lacks received care at the Johns Hopkins hospital where Dr. George Otto Gey, a microbiologist, realized that her cells were different during a routine examination of cells from a cancer patient. He just didn't realize how important they would become. However, it did make me wonder if Mrs. Lacks, a poor African-American woman, was treated differently than a rich, White woman would have been, especially in light of the infamous 40-year Tuskegee syphilis experimentation that was ongoing at that time. (African-American men were not given a known cure of penicillin to treat their disease for observational purposes.) In addition to helping to develop the polio vaccine, HeLa cells have been used to find treatments for cancer and in HIV research and they have even been in space, where they multiply at an even faster rate.

The author, Rebecca Skloot, first learned about the HeLa cells when she was 16 years old in biology class. She went on to become a writer specializing in science and medicine, and remained inquisitive about the origin of the HeLa cells. In her book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Ms. Skloot very aptly describes the extreme emotional trauma and confusion the Lacks

*"Gripping . . . by turns heartbreaking, funny and unsettling . . . raises troubling questions about the way Mrs. Lacks and her family were treated by researchers and about whether patients should control or have financial claims on tissue removed from their bodies."*

—Denise Grady, *The New York Times*

family encountered with the discovery of their mother's cells still being alive and how the HeLa cells have helped mankind, only to be countered by the knowledge that others benefited financially from them. And if that wasn't enough, the family was even approached by a con artist known as Dr. Sir Lord Keenan Kester Cofield.

The Lacks family and scientists have been very instrumental in tightening the US Common Rule, initially established in 1991, to protect volunteers participating in federally-funded research studies. In 2017, the Common Rule was updated; however, human body blood, urine, tissue, and other specimens leftover from clinical care may be used for future research trials without the donor's consent if they are stripped of names and other identifying information. NIH director Francis Collins, among others, would like the research community to consider changing the Common Rule to require consent to be obtained from anyone from whom biological specimens are taken before the samples are used in research—even if the specimens are "de-identified" from the person they came from. I know that after reading the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, I have an opinion. I would love to hear what you think. Please email your thoughts to [MKootsikis@outlook.com](mailto:MKootsikis@outlook.com) to possibly be printed in an upcoming BHNA newsletter. Maybe we can start a Bluff Heights book club.

A huge thank you to HeLa for continuing to help us in our efforts to discover a vaccine to fight COVID-19.

*Maria Kootsikis and her husband, Paul Montalbano, retired pharmacists' recently moved to the beautiful neighborhood of Bluff Heights.*

