Wonder Woman

The Life, Death, and Life After Death of Henrietta Lacks, Unwitting Heroine of Modern Medical Science



Photo courtesy the Lacks’ family

Henrietta Lacks

**By** [**Van Smith**](http://www2.citypaper.com/archives/browse.asp?byline=Van+Smith) **| Posted** [**4/17/2002**](http://www2.citypaper.com/default.asp?issuedate=4/17/2002)

**On Feb. 1, 1951, Henrietta Lacks**--mother of five, native of rural southern Virginia, resident of the Turner Station neighborhood in Dundalk--went to Johns Hopkins Hospital with a worrisome symptom: spotting on her underwear. She was quickly diagnosed with cervical cancer. Eight months later, despite surgery and radiation treatment, the Sparrows Point shipyard worker's wife died at age 31 as she lay in the hospital's segregated ward for blacks.

Not all of Henrietta Lacks died that October morning, though. She unwittingly left behind a piece of herself that still lives today.

While she was in Hopkins' care, researchers took a fragment of Lacks' tumor and sliced it into little cubes, which they bathed in nutrients and placed in an incubator. The cells, dubbed "HeLa" for Henrietta Lacks, multiplied as no other cells outside the human body had before, doubling their numbers daily. Their dogged growth spawned a breakthrough in cell research; never before could investigators reliably experiment on such cell cultures because they would weaken and die before meaningful results could be obtained. On the day of Henrietta's death, the head of Hopkins' tissue-culture research lab, Dr. George Gey, went before TV cameras, held up a tube of HeLa cells, and announced that a new age of medical research had begun--one that, someday, could produce a cure for cancer.

When he discovered HeLa could survive even shipping via U.S. mail, Gey sent his prize culture to colleagues around the country. They allowed HeLa to grow a little, and then sent some to *their* colleagues. Demand quickly rose, so the cells were put into mass production and traveled around the globe--even into space, on an unmanned satellite to determine whether human tissues could survive zero gravity.

In the half-century since Henrietta Lacks' death, her tumor cells--whose combined mass is probably much larger than Lacks was when she was alive--have continually been used for research into cancer, AIDS, the effects of radiation and toxic substances, gene mapping, and countless other scientific pursuits. Dr. Jonas Salk used HeLa to help develop his polio vaccine in the early '50s. The cells are so hardy that they took over other tissue cultures, researchers discovered in the 1970s, leading to reforms in how such cultures are handled. In the biomedical world, HeLa cells are as famous as lab rats and petri dishes.

Yet Henrietta Lacks herself remains shrouded in obscurity. Gey, of course, knew HeLa's origins, but he believed confidentiality was paramount--so for years, Henrietta's family didn't know her cells still lived, much less how important they had become. After Gey died in 1970, the secret came out. But it was not until 1975, when a scientifically savvy fellow dinner-party guest asked family members if they were related to the mother of the HeLa cell, that Lacks' descendants came to understand her critical role in medical research.

The concept was mind-blowing--in a sense, it seemed to Lacks' family, she was being kept alive in the service of science. "It just kills me," says Henrietta's daughter, Deborah Lacks-Pullum, now 52 and still living in Baltimore, "to know my mother's cells are all over the world."

In the 27 years since the Lacks family serendipitously learned of Henrietta's unwitting contribution, little has been done to honor her. "Henrietta Lacks Day" is celebrated in Turner Station each year on Feb. 1. In 1996, prompted by Atlanta's Morehouse College, that city's mayor proclaimed Oct. 11 Henrietta Lacks Day. The following year, Congress passed a resolution in her memory sponsored by Rep. Robert Ehrlich (R-Md.), whose 2nd District includes Turner Station, and the British Broadcasting Corp. produced a documentary on her remarkable story. Beyond that, however, virtually nothing has been done to celebrate Lacks' contribution--not even by Hopkins, which gained immeasurable prestige from Gey's work with her cells.

Lacks-Pullum is bitter about this. "We never knew they took her cells, and people done got filthy rich [from HeLa-based research], but we don't get a dime," she says. The family can't afford a reputable lawyer to press its case for some financial stake in the work. She says she has appealed to Hopkins for help, and "all they do is pat me on my shoulder and put me out the door."

Hopkins spokesperson Gary Stephenson is quick to point out that Hopkins never sold HeLa, so it didn't make money from Henrietta's contribution. Still, he says, "there are people here who would like something done, and I'm hoping that at some point something will be done in a formal way to note her very, very important contribution."

Lacks-Pullum shares those hopes, but she is pessimistic. "Hopkins," she says, "they don't care."

Lost in the acrimony over ethical and financial issues stemming from Henrietta Lacks' cells, though, is Henrietta Lacks herself. A descendant of slaves and slaveholders, she grew up farming the same land on which her forebears toiled--and that her relatives still farm today. As part of an aspiring black middle class with rural roots, she left her childhood home to join a migration to Baltimore, where Bethlehem Steel was eager to hire hard workers from the country. She was in the midst of realizing an American dream when her life was cut short. And her cells helped realize society's larger dreams for health and knowledge. As such, she's been called a hero, a martyr, even a saint. But during her life, as Ehrlich said to his colleagues in Congress, Henrietta Lacks "was known as pleasant and smiling, and always willing lending a helping hand." That she did, in more ways than she ever knew.

**DIRECTIONS: WRITE A FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY ANSWERING THE FOLLOWING QUESTION. PLEASE INCLUDE ONE DIRECT QUOTE FROM THE ESSAY TO SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENT. REMEMBER THE FIVE PARAGRAPHS SHOULD CONSIST OF A THESIS, THREE BODY PARAGRAPHS AND A CONCLUSION. FOR THIS ESSAY YOU CAN USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS SUCH AS: I, ME, MY, WE, US, OUR. HOWEVER, YOU CANNOT USE CONTRACTIONS.**

**QUESTION: DO YOU THINK IT WAS FAIR FOR JOHNS HOPKINS TO NOT COMPENSATE THE LACKS’ FAMILY? WHY OR WHY NOT? PLEASE USE EXAMPLES FROM THE ARTICLE TO SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENT.**