Did you know that you can find bioethics in a best selling book? Recently, when I was on the couch with the flu, I read a book that had been recommended to me several times, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. This Oprah’s Book Club favorite is the story of a woman whose cells changed the course of medical research. And the timing is just right. I finished the book just before International Women’s Day, which is March 8. You could say that Henrietta Lacks unknowingly changed the lives of women around the world.

In 1951, Henrietta Lacks, a poor, young, African American mother of five, began treatment at Johns Hopkins Hospital for an aggressive form of cervical cancer. About one year before Henrietta died, her doctors gave a sample of her unusual tumor to Dr. George Gey, who was trying to find cells that could be grown in the lab for medical research. He hoped that these cells could be used to find a cure for cancer. Dr. Gey discovered that Henrietta’s cells were “immortal” as they grew indefinitely in culture and never died. These cells, called HeLa for short, have been distributed to laboratories worldwide for use in medical research. HeLa cells have been used to develop the first polio vaccine, to test the effects of radiation and toxins in humans, to produce drugs for a number of diseases such as leukemia, and have been sent into space. Five Nobel prizes were based on HeLa research. As of 2009, more than 60,000 scientific articles have been published about research done on HeLa cells and this number keeps growing.

Neither Henrietta’s family nor Dr. Gey profited from her cells, but others have. Over 17,000 patents involving the use of HeLa cells have been registered by researchers and biotech companies.

You can probably guess what one of the ethical issues is, when I tell you that the cells were taken without Henrietta’s consent, and she was not informed. Informed consent was not a standard practice in the early 1950s. That has changed, and doctors now use informed consent forms so that tissues removed in surgery or biopsies may be used for research. Let me list just some of the other issues you might recognize as you read her story: who should profit from research on human tissues? Do patents on human genes encourage research, or are they a way to hoard the possibility of profits? There are concerns about who benefits from genomic research. Many of the tissue donors are too poor to afford experimental therapies. How do science and medical research guard against exploitation of ethnic minorities or vulnerable populations globally? You might notice other issues as you read.

So, the next time you have a few hours, put down the remote control and pick up a good book. You might be amazed at the bioethical issues you encounter.


Links: