Eila Overcash

Mr. Kuka

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The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks Paragraphs

In the prologue to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot explains the path she took to writing her book. In 1988, when Skloot was taking a biology class, the instructor explained that HeLa cells came from a woman who had died of cervical cancer in 1951. Skloot was fascinated by the cells and by the woman who produced them, and eventually decided to investigate further. While she came to know Henrietta and her family intimately, she also learned about the process through which the cells were reproduced and their many scientific benefits.

The scientific benefits of HeLa cells were evident almost immediately. Soon after the cells were removed from Lacks, doctors realized that they did not die off as other cells did, and further investigation showed that they would easily reproduce in many environments. In addition to being easy to reproduce, the cells were also easy to ship, which led to their broader use. As the use of the cells spread, scientists realized the need for standardization to make their work replicable. HeLa cells pushed forward scientific practices, and their use continues to improve medical care to this day.

While HeLa cells advanced scientific practice, the *Tuskegee Syphilis Study* did not. The study ran for 40 years using as test subjects black men who were unaware they had syphilis. One objective was to determine if white and black men reacted differently to syphilis; however, the

real outcomes were the deaths of several of the test subjects and the infection of the wives and children of others. The study continued after penicillin was recognized as a treatment for syphilis. The *Syphilis Study* is a reminder that science is not always in the best interest of humanity, as it was with the HeLa advancements.