

HENRIETTA LACKS' IMMORTAL LEGACY (1920 - 1951)

Written by Molly Sinnott
Art by Kay Sohini
BIG HISTORY PROJECT

SCIENTISTS STUDY CELLS TO UNDERSTAND HOW DISEASES START AND SPREAD, BUT MOST CELLS DIE QUICKLY. IN THE 1950S, ONE WOMAN'S CELLS PROVED TO BE "IMMORTAL" AND HELPED US LEARN TO TREAT MANY DISEASES. BUT SHE DID NOT RECEIVE CREDIT UNTIL RECENTLY.

Henrietta Lacks grew up in the 1920s on the same Virginia land her ancestors had lived on as enslaved people.

She loved to cook for friends and family, and above all, dance.



In 1951, Henrietta developed cancer. She went to Johns Hopkins, one of the only hospitals in Baltimore that would accept Black patients.

Without her consent, doctors took a sample of a tumor they found in her cervix. Despite painful radium treatments, the cancer quickly spread.
Henrietta died on October 1, 1951.



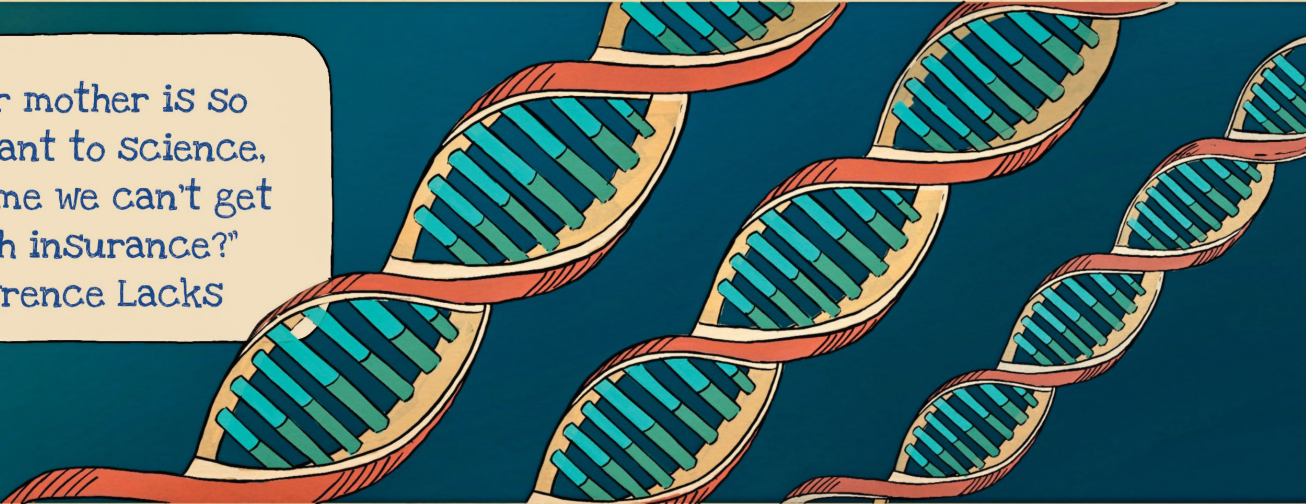
But despite her passing, her contribution to medicine had just begun. When doctors took a sample of Henrietta's tumor, they tested her cells. They were labeled **HeLa**: the first two letters of Henrietta's first and last names. These cells solved a major problem for medical science. At that time, cells used in research died after just a few days. But HeLa cells grew and grew—and continue to do so today. HeLa cells are responsible for the polio vaccine and have led to **BREAKTHROUGHS IN HIV, CANCER, AND GENETIC MAPPING.**

"HeLa cell lines were perpetual, everlasting, death-defying, or whatever other word you want to use to describe immortal."
-Dr. Francis Collins

Many companies have made huge profits from selling HeLa cells. But Henrietta's family did not know about HeLa cells until over 20 years after her death. Then they were publicly identified as belonging to Henrietta—releasing information about her and her family without their knowledge.



"If our mother is so important to science, how come we can't get health insurance?"
-Lawrence Lacks



HENRIETTA'S CONTRIBUTION TO SCIENCE IS HARD TO OVERSTATE.

But she and her cells are also significant in confronting racial inequalities that exist within health care. They've led to important changes in the way we think about consent, identity, and the rights we have over our own bodies.