

UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy - PharmD Class of 2017

Suggested Discussion Questions for Summer Reading

“The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks”

By Rebecca Skloot

1. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is the story of an African American woman and her family that touches on many big issues: bioethics, racism, poverty, science, faith, and more. What threads stand out to you? Which threads are particularly important/relevant for the 21st century pharmacist?
2. Race and racism are woven throughout the book, both in the story presented and in the process of researching the book. Skloot was yet another white person asking the Lacks family about Henrietta. How did her race help or hinder Skloot in the writing and researching of the book? How can race help or hinder or generally impact your practice as a pharmacist?
3. What role did the deferential attitude towards doctors in the early 20th century play in the interaction between Henrietta and her family and John Hopkins? How has that attitude towards doctors changed over the decades? Do patients' socioeconomic differences affect the relationship with pharmacists today? If so, how?
4. The book is filled with stories of people used as research subjects, sometimes without their knowledge, sometimes with ill-informed consent, sometimes because their inability to understand (patients with mental illness) or resist (prisoners). Were you aware of this history before reading the book? Do you think that doctors (and pharmacists) of the past had a fundamentally different view of people than they do today? How do you think the principal of social justice and equity has impacted the practice of pharmacy in the past 50 years?
5. One of the issues this book addresses is patient privacy. Henrietta completely lost hers long before the book was published, but also didn't get the fame her daughter, Deborah, thought she so richly deserved. Why does Deborah want fame for Henrietta? What implications does patient privacy and rights have for the practice of pharmacy?
6. Making health care affordable to all Americans (including prescription medications) has been a recent political focus. What does the story of Henrietta Lacks and her family add to this discussion? Did your perception of health care access change after reading this book?

7. When Mary Kubicek, Dr. Gey's assistant, was at Henrietta's autopsy she notice Henrietta's painted toes and was reminded that the cells she'd been working with actually came from a live person. Do most people working in labs or with patients have this disconnect between their human samples/patients and their origins? Has this changed over time?
8. The passage in which the initial fated cells were removed from Henrietta's body reads as follows (page 33):

“With Henrietta unconscious on the operating table in the center of the room, her feet in stirrups, the surgeon on duty, Dr. Lawrence Wharton Jr., sat on a stool between her legs. He peered inside Henrietta, dilated her cervix, and prepared to treat her tumor. But first – though no one had told Henrietta that Telinde was collecting samples or asked if she wanted to be a donor – Wharton picket up a sharp knife and shaved two dime-sized pieces of tissue from Henrietta's cervix: one from her tumor, and one from the healthy cervical tissue nearby. Then he place the samples in a glass dish.”

- a. Bearing in mind that those two tissue samples removed from Henrietta were not removed in an attempt to treat her cancer, but rather purely for the purposes of research, was it wrong for the doctor to remove the sample tissues in the first place? Was it wrong for Dr. Gey to collect those samples for the purpose of trying to grow them in controlled conditions? Does the end – i.e., the immeasurable benefit to humankind resulting from those tissue samples – justify the means – i.e., removing tissue from a person without their consent or knowledge? What does this book tell us about the history of science and medicine and how science has process since the 1950's?
9. What is your opinion of the needs of scientific/medical research versus the ethical rights of individuals?
 10. If you discovered that tissue routinely removed from your body at some point in the past went to significantly benefit science and research, would you feel that you should somehow be compensated? What do you think is more important – a person's personal rights over their own tissue, or contributing to science and research for the benefit of all humankind?